

# Artists' Genres

A brief introduction to  
post-medieval Western art

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**Cover photograph: Gillis van Tilborgh, Family Portrait, 1665, oil on canvas, 80.3 x 104 cm,  
Mauritshuis, The Hague**



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# Introduction

Art historians use a variety of means to organize the history of art. Most fundamental are chronological narratives, in which works of art are classified according to date and location of creation. Within these chronologies, works of art are usually further organized into stylistic categories, as expressions of an individual artist or workshop, or visual characteristics that unite the production of an art center or region, or larger stylistic characteristics belonging to a period and place in history. It is a special feature of post-medieval Western art history that it has also been additionally structured around a succession of great artists and works of art, each treated as a unique contribution to the larger history of Western art. We do this for post-medieval Western art because, since the Renaissance, our conception of art has always been about important, innovative artists and their works. This Western way of thinking about art stands in contrast to many societies and periods in history when the names of artists have either been lost or are of less importance than other cultural factors or where tradition is prized far more strongly than innovation.

This artist-centered Western art history structured around innovation was the creation of the artists themselves. During the 15th century artists began to insist they were more than craftsmen, much more than skilled laborers who worked with their hands. Especially in Italy, artists argued that their works contributed ideas and visions of the world that made them at least the equals of poets and philosophers. Some claimed even higher status for the artist, since the artist created worlds that mirrored God's creation. As the prestige of artists began to rise, so too did the overall prestige of the visual arts in Western society. By the 16th century, collectors began to acquire what would then have been regarded as 'modern' art. To acquire their pieces, collectors might commission the artwork directly from the artist. However, as time passed, collectors increasingly turned to resale markets for art, buying works attributed to some famous artist at second hand.

From the origins of collecting contemporary and what soon became known as 'old Master' art, the art market valued works of art by named artists more than those by unknown artists. A prized skill out of which modern

art history developed was the capacity to distinguish on sight the 'hand' of a respective master and to gauge the 'quality' of a work of art.

Art history has long since moved beyond being concerned only with connoisseurship. Today, art historians typically explore many different forms of visual culture manifest in a given society, ranging from 'high' art to the 'decorative' arts to the kinds of imagery produced by science and so on, and are concerned with many other features in the production and reception of works of art besides style. Yet, the residue of this long tradition in Western art history is that most introductions of Western art continue to feature the works of great artists arranged chronologically.

This book offers a different approach to post-medieval Western art. It argues that an introduction to post-medieval Western art can be done more effectively and with greater flexibility through the study of the major genres within which much of Western art has been expressed. Concentrating on genres allows for the exploration of some basic rules of artists' behaviors and techniques that have contributed to the kinds of artworks they have made. This book is also factually concerned with only the broadest cultural trends. For specific information about artists, artworks and similar art-related subjects readers should turn to myriad sources online or in libraries. The primary goal of this book is to equip the reader with a general conceptual basis with which to organize both the information now so immediately at hand via the Internet and to provide a guide for how to look and think about art. Knowing some of the rules and traditions that have shaped the major genres, a museum or art gallery visitor should possess an effective frame of reference with which to approach virtually any work of post-medieval Western art.





## On genres, artists, and their markets

### Defining Genres

What are genres? The word can mean different things according to how it is used and what it references. The most inclusive use of the word belongs perhaps to literary studies, where a genre typically defines the form of writing under discussion. In this sense a genre could be represented by anything from a business letter to a personal journal to an email to a novel. Each mode of communication has standard practices and normative rules of behavior. In some writing genres, like the business letter, the rules are highly conventionalized. While these rules can occasionally be altered, they are typically closely followed. This has to do with everything from the format in which the letter is written, to formalized greetings, to the 'tone' of the letter itself. In contrast, other literary genres, especially those attached to 'creative writing' allow for far more variation. But for all the genre busting one finds in literature, the rules for a novel, for example are typically, though not always, easy to discern from those that characterize a poem or short story or a film script.

Film, or rather, mass-marketed movies, acquired most of its genres from literature, because most films are shaped around fictional narratives. Science fiction, film noir, mysteries, etc. belong to a tradition of filmmaking, now well over a hundred years old, and many of them have their origins in literary forms going back decades or even centuries before the invention of film. Because the cost of making fictional films and the potential profits derived from them are so much greater than an individual work of literature, film production has over the years tended to favor the predominance of some genres over others. And some genres go in and out of fashion, such as the American western.

The visual arts, by comparison, have had far fewer genres than literature or film, because of their far more complicated relationship to narrative. The traditional media of painting, sculpture, printmaking, and photography only achieve narration by condensing action into a single, stilled scene. What is depicted often implies what came earlier in the represented story and/or what followed. Important genres in painting

like still life and landscape do not lend themselves easily to this kind of narrative device. The visual arts, therefore, have generally been organized around broadly defined subjects rather than by the type of narrative they contain. Thus, until the 20th century, the major genres in the visual arts can be reduced to seven major fields: religious art, historical art, mythological art, portraits, genre scenes (depictions of everyday life), landscapes, and still lifes.

Many of these seven genres first appeared as independent entities in post-medieval Western art during the 15th and 16th centuries. From the end of Greco-Roman antiquity in Western Europe to the Renaissance, the primary functions of art were confined to religious devotion and/or to expressions of power either of the Church or of a secular leader. The expansion of the European economies that began with the Crusades created new audiences and a demand for luxury goods that eventually allowed for the development of new genres. Yet it was only in the 16th century that one begins to find artworks that might be described as consisting wholly of 'landscape' and nothing else, or wholly of 'still life' and nothing else. Consequently, the rise of new genres, whatever other social forces led to their independent creation, expressed basic economic changes in European society from the Renaissance on as related to art: 1) the rising status of the artist and of art collecting; 2) the increased demand for luxury goods, which included works of art, enabled by important transformations in the European economy during the 'Age of Discovery'; and 3) innovations in both the products and the processes by which art was produced. These three developments are densely interwoven, so while we can talk about any one of these elements independently, they were at all times interacting with and shaping each other.

One of the most striking features of genres is their tenacious ability to shape artistic behavior. When a painter sits down today to paint a still life today she is necessarily working within a many-layered tradition to which many artists, both major and minor, have contributed. Despite the tens of thousands (or even a great many more) still lifes that have been painted since the 15th century, continuities persist within this tradition that connect still lifes painted today with those made five hundred years ago. Because of these continuities, the still life genre usually appears instantly recognizable and we usually have little trouble recognizing what is a still life and what isn't.

What survives across the centuries in a genre is a set of rules inside which certain types of artistic acts can be performed. A genre also establishes certain kinds of expectations on the part of its audience. If I said to someone that last night I watched a horror movie, they would



immediately recognize the genre and would anticipate at least some of the elements of whatever movie it was I saw. This shared expectation, which is derived from the viewer's earlier experience with the genre, expedites the transmission of information. It also works in the visual arts. If I say I like landscape paintings (and am no more specific than that) the listener might hold in one's mind a represented image of nature, probably something pleasing to look at, perhaps something rich in color. Perhaps the listener might recall their favorite kind of landscape; one might immediately envision, say, one of Claude Monet's Impressionist landscapes.

We might be tempted therefore to think of a genre in the visual arts as if it were a container that separates everything that belongs to the genre from all other forms of artistic expression. Such conceptual containers are valuable when organizing information about the world. But if we hold too strongly to the idea of a genre as a box, which isolates one kind of artwork from another, then we fail to allow for the multiple possible expressions artists are able to make within and across genres. There are no absolute rules in art, since there are no exterior principles against which art must be measured. Consequently, artists always have multiple choices to make when approaching a genre. They can strictly adhere to its rules laid down by notable earlier practitioners; they can defy some of those rules and accept others; or they might even stand the genre on its head, presenting to the audience the appearance of one kind of genre when in fact it is a different genre entirely, as when the 16th-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo creates the head of a man out

of an artfully arranged collection of vegetables (ills. #1.1).



Ills. #1.1 Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–1593) *Summer*, 1563 Oil on Wood 67 x 50.8 cm Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

This elasticity of use might suggest that the boundaries of genres resemble the membrane of a balloon, something that can be stretched this way and that as artists play with its rules. But even the balloon metaphor suggests something impermeable to the outside world, in particular to other genres, when in fact, the history of genres in art is often a history of the confusion of the genres or what these days is often termed 'hybridity'. Two or more genres may be noticeable in a single work of art, or one might observe artworks in which no one genre can be clearly identified.

So what is the value of thinking about art through genres if they are in practice are sometimes so vaporous?

Again, it helps to consider the temporal nature of genres, the way in which they are expressions of traditions of artistic practice that have been handed down from one generation to another. Genres express traditions of audience expectations, which artists often, but not always, seek to satisfy. If I were a painter and I set up my canvas before some woodland scene, I might organize my composition, I might paint my trees, consciously or not, using techniques and arrangements that have many precedents in the history of landscape art. In fact, so powerful and so plentiful are the conventions of landscape painting that I might quickly become concerned that my painting will appear too formulaic. To paint an interesting landscape might require that I discover new pictorial devices to make my scene more engaging to the viewer. I might believe that for my landscape to be a success I must somehow show the natural world in a way no one has quite seen before. Or, conversely, I might respond to the general public interest in genres like landscape as a low-wage laborer would, producing formulaic landscapes for a tourist market. In this case, the 'tricks' of the painting trade are simply the best means to produce the most work in the shortest space of time. What this tells us about genres is that how and why the rules are applied are just as important in thinking about a genre as the stylistic characteristics of individual works within a genre.

### The idea of the artist

The emergence of the major genres during the Renaissance closely paralleled the reinvention of the idea of the artist, that was originally to be found in Greco-Roman antiquity. During the 15th and 16th centuries the perception of the artist changed from that of a skilled artisan to that of the imaginative genius. The former had been in most instances anonymous, whereas the latter typically was regarded as important enough to have the artist's name remembered.



In 1435 the great humanist scholar, mathematician, and architect, Leon Battista Alberti published a widely influential treatise entitled "On Painting." While most of the treatise concerned the mathematics behind the application of one-point linear perspective, Alberti also made claims on behalf of 15th-century artists that were grounded in what he could learn from surviving classical texts about the status of artists in ancient Greece and Rome. Alberti recalled how ancient rulers held artists in the highest regard and how they would spend fortunes for a famous artist's work. Alberti suggested that the modern prince, in order to be cultivated, should similarly patronize artists, who were implicitly different from craftsmen. Alberti argued that what should be admired in a work of art was the imagination of the artist rather than the costliness of the materials used or the amount of labor that went into a work of art's making. In this way, Alberti laid the theoretical groundwork for changing the status of the artist. For Alberti and the artists who followed in his wake, the painter or sculptor should not be treated like a table maker or similarly skilled artisans, but rather should be regarded as being on par with the poet or the philosopher, as a man of ideas. Over several centuries artists increasingly asserted their social status and some, like the early 16th-century Italian artists Raphael and Michelangelo, sought to be treated even on near equal footing as the prince or wealthy businessman who were their patrons.

The rising status of the artist reflected the growing demand for artistic innovation. A painting could not be like a table, a mere replica of long-held practices in table-making. A painting, for it to be significant, for it to be an expression of an artist's genius, had to introduce new formal and thematic treatments of conventional subjects, or wholly new subjects or, very rarely, new genres. In this way, innovation was built into the modern conception of the artist and hence the emphasis on artistic originality.

In practice, however, the rise of the idea of the artist/genius developed within a workshop/guild system, prevalent across Western Europe, which were created to promote and to protect craft traditions in the marketplace. Guilds restricted its membership, protecting a community from outside competitors, and set standards of craftsmanship. Guild members generally worked inside the institution of a workshop, which dominated art production in most places in Western Europe until at least the end of the 16th century and in some places sometimes much later. Artist workshops were quite different from our modern conception of the artist's studio. The workshop served multiple social and artistic functions. It was the primary training center for aspiring artists, who typically entered a workshop at a young age and, as their skills

developed, took on greater responsibilities as apprentices and then journeymen. If he had sufficient skill and sufficient means, the journeyman could eventually become his own master of a shop.



Ills. #1.2 Phillips Galle, *Colori olivi*, c. 1580–1605, engraving, 20.4 x 27.1 cm, British Museum, London

An important consequence of workshop organization is that it was quite common for multiple individuals to be involved in the production of a work of art. These are paintings and sculptures that today we often treat as the achievement of a single artist, whereas in fact the “artist” was frequently the master plus his various apprentices. *Color Olivi* (*Oil painting*) published by the Antwerp printing firm run by Phillips Galle (ills. #1.2) in the late 16th century, shows a workshop master at work on a large-scale religious painting (St. George Slaying the Dragon) while a journeyman works on a portrait nearby. Young apprentices are learning the rudiments of their craft, while older apprentices grind the color pigments, mix the pigments with oil, and carry out the other necessary preparations for the master and his chief assistants. While Galle’s image is perhaps an ideal representation of an artist’s workshop, it does suggest how the division of labor would have been made for the sake of efficiency. The master in this representation would no doubt have applied the finishing touches to the portrait his journeyman is painting as well as to the religious painting. When both works left his shop, they would be marketed as works made by the master alone.



Certain techniques, like marble carving and fresco painting, were especially dependent upon numerous skilled artisans, besides the master, in their creation. We know from Renaissance contracts that patrons often stipulated not only the materials and design to be used in a commissioned artwork, but also the amount of work that the patron expected the master to contribute to the artwork's execution. Such agreements presumably were intended to ensure that the resulting artwork would conform to a high standard. The patron wanted to get the best possible return on his or her investment. This sometimes led to legal disputes. A patron might perceive inadequacies in execution as a break in the contract—the failure by the master to work as much on the project as stipulated.

The artist's workshop also often functioned as his salesroom. Prior to the 18th century, there were few venues through which an artist could reach an unknown audience. Permanent exhibition spaces appear to have been a 16th-century invention and professional art dealers were largely a phenomenon of the 17th century. Auction houses also arose to serve the increasingly large market for the re-sale of works of art. Living artists could create works on commission, under the often-close supervision of a patron, or they could create works for an unknown, or what economists would describe as an anonymous market. Until the 19th century large-scale projects almost always were created on commission. Artists could rarely afford the costs both in time and materials of large works without a prior contractual commitment from a patron. Smaller works, like those often found in still life and landscape painting, tended to produce for an anonymous market. Artists working in this way often developed formula or models in composition and subjects and that had a proven audience and then created close copies or at least closely related variants on the successful model.

Working for an anonymous market or working on commission each had advantages and disadvantages. An anonymous market was by definition an uncertain market. The master of a workshop typically had many individuals to support, his own family plus the young apprentices and the older journeymen. Falling sales could prove disastrous to this enterprise. Artists were encouraged therefore to make works in such a style and genre that either had sold well in the past or had strong potential for future sales.

Antwerp workshops often acquired a 'brand' identity rather than developed a personal 'style'. The early 16th-century workshop belonging to Joachim Patinir illustrates this pattern. Patinir we believe was an important innovator in the creation of panoramic landscape vistas, as evidenced by his painting of *The Penitence of St. Jerome* (ills. #1.3).





Ills. #1.3 Joachim Patinir, *The Penitence of Saint Jerome*, c. 1518, oil on wood, 120.7 x 35.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

From a theological perspective the most important features of this painting are the three religious subjects represented in the foreground of this triptych: Christ being baptized by St. John the Baptist on the left, St. Jerome in the wilderness in the center, and the Temptation of St. Anthony on the right wing. Yet what unites these subjects thematically is the 'wilderness' that each man enters at a critical moment in his life, a wilderness that spreads uninterrupted across the three panels of Patinir's picture. So prominent is this landscape that it dwarfs in scale the respective religious narratives and demonstrates that on aesthetic grounds at least the landscape was the main attraction of the painting for Patinir's clientele. Indeed, it is likely that another artist, such as the Antwerp painter Quentin Massys, contributed the figures.

In this way, the workshop master typically developed his or her own brand, independent of the tastes of a patron. This brand expressed a particular set of expertises such as the predominance of a particular genre as well as characteristic treatments of the genre. Today we tend to describe these visual characteristics as an artist's "style." Style in this sense is commonly understood to be the highly personal, largely unconscious expression of the artist. Our modern idea of style, however,



hardly captures the complexity of artists negotiating commercially viable formulae, of creating products that had the best chance of selling.

For example, 16th-century Antwerp, possessed both an international market and a strong workshop tradition. Within this particular market environment an artist who manages to create a new and commercially successful treatment of a subject, such as the image of tax collectors, might have his motif taken up by multiple artists over multiple generations and given strikingly similar treatments, so much so that art historians today struggle to define what is an "original" by a given artist and what is a "copy," or a less skilled version of the subject created in the same workshop by journeymen or even apprentices.

For many years Quinten Massys' *Tax Collectors* (ills. #1.4), which is now be considered the origin of this particular treatment of the subject, was attributed to a follower of Marinus van Reymerswaele (ills. #1.5). Even though Massys worked a generation before Marinus van Reymerswaele, the later artist and Massys' own son Jan made career reworking Quinten Massys' successful images as well as those of other Antwerp artists, of both lesser and equal quality to the prototype. The very large number of tax collectors that generally followed the Massys' formula attests to the commercial popularity of the image. Perhaps the theme appealed to a



Ills. #1.4 Quinten Massys, *Tax Collectors*, late 1520s, oil on panel, 86 x 71 cm. Liechtenstein Collection, Vaduz/Vienna



Ills. #1.5 Marinus van Reymerswaele, *Two Tax Gatherers*, c. 1540, oil on panel, 92 x 74.6 The National Gallery, London

thriving Flemish merchant class, who no doubt even then resented paying taxes.

If the workshop system encouraged artists to brand their shop with consistent subjects rendered in a characteristic style, the reverse generally was true of the artist who worked on commission, especially for artists who had a position at a prince's court. Depending on the patron, the artist's freedom to work independently could be very constrained. In exchange for the influence a patron might attempt to exert on the artist, the artist gained job security, generally accompanied by a regular income. And if the artist was lucky to have an enlightened patron, potentially such an artist could enjoy far greater possibilities for exploring new ideas and new ways to treat a genre than an artist dependent largely on an anonymous market to make a living.

In Renaissance Italy, where artists most often worked on commission or under court patronage, there developed a pronounced tradition of artistic innovation. Technical and thematic novelties allowed artists to distinguish themselves from their competitors and to find important patrons. It is no coincidence that major innovative artists like Raphael and Leonardo benefited from a continuous flow of exceptional patrons. And with patronage came both money and artistic freedom. By 16th-century standards, Raphael died a very rich man. And Leonardo enjoyed the freedom to explore an unprecedented range of ideas, even though he often failed to deliver to his patron a finished product.

In Northern Europe, the artist guild/ workshop tradition remained strong until the end of the 17th century. Some artists were able to benefit from both court and church patronage and the anonymous market, but the institutional environment clearly favored the latter. Enterprising Flemish and Dutch artists thus frequently looked abroad to find patrons, particularly portrait artists. Even in Italy, one finds from the middle of the 16th century onward a growing presence of an anonymous market, often in service of the tourist/pilgrimage industry that brought foreigners to the key markets of Rome and Venice. The Italian art world was largely unfettered by guild restrictions and it was in Italy first that "academies" replaced the workshop as the training centers for aspiring artists. Across Europe by the 18th century most artists, worked essentially as independent contractors, increasingly without either guild support or that of a patron. Commissioned works of art came to play less and less an important role in artistic production. Instead, artists began to compete for clients in the context of public exhibitions, like the Paris Salon, established in the late 17th century.



### Genres and market segmentation

Some genres are commission-dominant, as in the cases of portraiture and large-scale religious art. Making portraits was until the 20th century one of the most profitable ways for an artist to earn a living. Likewise commissions to decorate churches, or to create public monuments, while less frequent than portrait commissions, could occupy (and fund) an artist for years. Although lucrative, art on commission was always constrained by the client's expectations. Artists had to learn to meet these expectations while subtly altering and expanding on well-established conventions. Consequently, within commission-dominant genres the important distinctions between works within the genre are typically defined first in terms of subject matter, then by materials, scale, and stylistic treatment. Artists distinguished themselves from their competitors by small and large innovations in the treatment of their subjects.

Religious art, because of its close relationship with sacred narratives, was always thematically complex. Artists and their patrons could draw on an almost infinite variety of subjects, whether they were scenes from the Old or the New Testaments of the Bible, or scenes from the life of Christ and/or related individuals usually drawn from apocryphal sources, or scenes from the lives of saints, and so on. What set an artist's treatment of a subject apart from his or her rivals was measured both by the quality of the execution of the work and by the novelty of the treatment of the theme. Large-scale religious and public commissions had to satisfy the clearly defined expectations of the clients regarding what the completed work should look like. Often artists provided their patrons with preparatory drawings that sketched out the basic composition, while contracts referred to the materials to be used and how long the work was expected to take to complete.

This is not to say that religious images were wholly dependent on commissions. In fact, in the later Middle Ages, a thriving industry developed in small-scale, highly portable religious images. These objects were made for private religious devotions, some tied to religious pilgrimages. They ranged from luxury goods, such as intricately carved items and small-scale panel paintings, to, by the 15th century, cheaply produced prints for a mass market. But by their very nature, such images, even when beautifully made, were rarely innovative, and rarely rose above the level of expert craftsmanship.

The growing role of anonymous markets in the consumption of luxury goods like art led to the genres of art becoming increasingly complex. As Adam Smith observed in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the larger a market for a particular good the more producers could profitably specialize within that market. This is known as market segmentation. Like the genres themselves, a segmented market is inherently flexible. In 17th-century Holland, where a large and prosperous middle-class actively purchased tens of thousands of works of art by contemporary Dutch artists, most artists specialized in particular genres. With such large demand for pictures from the Dutch public, an artist could afford to concentrate on a single genre. Some Dutch artists are known exclusively for their still lifes, like Pieter Claesz. Heda (see ill. #5.12). Other artists were exclusively landscape painters, like Jacob Ruysdael (see ill. #4.6). Indeed, the overwhelming number of Dutch artists are associated with only one or two genres. Some genres even flourished more strongly in one Dutch city over the others. For example, early in the 17th century Utrecht's leading artists came strongly under the influence of the Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, and painted, as the Italian master did, both large format Biblical scenes and low-life genre scenes, often depicting taverns and brothels. Elsewhere in Holland, Johannes Vermeer's native city of Delft supported an active market in small-scale scenes of contemporary domestic interiors.

It is intriguing therefore that the most famous and influential of all Dutch artists, Rembrandt van Rijn, working in the most cosmopolitan of Dutch cities, Amsterdam, went against the norms of his contemporaries. Rembrandt made major works in multiple genres, in portraiture, in history painting, in landscape and genre painting. Nor did Rembrandt confine himself to a single medium, but instead created large and independent bodies of both drawings and prints. In fact, the only genre in which Rembrandt showed little interest was one of Dutch art's most popular genres: still life. It is probable that Rembrandt, by working in so many genres, and by working in multiple media, was demonstrating the full range of his artistic talents, while signaling his artistic ambitions. Although Rembrandt endured financial misfortunes in his lifetime, it is not coincidental that his posthumous reputation placed him as the most important of Dutch artists during the so-called Golden Age of Dutch art in the 17th century.

Another important expression of the division of labor in response to market demand can be found in the frequent collaborations between artists on a single work. Collaboration was particularly popular in 16th and early 17th-century Antwerp. One sees this in the workshop production for Joachim Patinir, where the landscapist worked with Antwerp figure painter.



Such collaborations continued to be popular well into the next century, especially in relation to the great Antwerp painter Peter Paul Rubens,



Ills. #1.6 Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Virgin and Child Surrounded by a Bouquet of Flowers and Fruit*, c. 1617-20, oil on panel, 79.7x 63.7 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid

known primarily for his figure painting, who worked with numerous Flemish artists specializing in flower painting and landscapes. For example, the most famous flower painter of the early 17th century, Jan Brueghel the Elder, provided the painted garland 'frame' around Rubens' image of the Madonna and Christ Child (ills. #1.6). This is only one example of a number of very similar pictures that Rubens and Brueghel painted together. And they painted together a variety of other types of pictures as well. No doubt Rubens could have competently painted the flowers without Brueghel's assistance, but this division of labor between two highly sought-after artists with different expertise maximized the potential value of the work.

The practice of multiple, independent and significant artists working on a single work largely disappeared from Western art over the course of

the 17th century and did not reappear until the 20th century. During the 1920s and 1930s an international group of modern artists who identified themselves as Surrealists engaged in a variety of collaborative experiments. Generally these were relatively minor creative activities, not much more than games. It was not until the 1970s with the development of Conceptual Art that collaborative artist groups like Art + Language and Group Material as well as such artist couples as Gilbert & George, began to create collaborative works at the scale and ambition of works made by Rubens and his contemporaries centuries earlier. And with the explosion of prices for contemporary art in the 21st century, it is noteworthy that artistic collaborations have become even more common.

One other important manifestation of market segmentation in genres is the development of subspecialties. For example, right at the beginning of the 17th century the still life genre developed the nearly independent subspecialty of flower painting, like those of Jan Brueghel the Elder. Other 17th-century still life painters chose to concentrate on what are known as *memento mori* pictures, still lifes that contain imagery that are associated with the theme of death, skulls, hourglasses, candles with their flames extinguished, and so on. Still others centered their practice on creating *trompe l'oeil* imagery, paintings designed to fool the eye, however briefly, regarding the apparent reality of the illusion the artist has created. One sees similar subspecialties occurring in landscape painting, also beginning in the 17th century. Some artists emphasized painting rural environments, others painted urban scenes. Within the landscape genre developed an exclusive interest in depicting architecture. Some artists depicted exteriors of landmark buildings, like town halls and famous churches; others painted their interiors.

### Technological innovations

The history of post-medieval Western art has been punctuated by important technological innovations. The rise of genres in art closely followed innovations in techniques and materials. Among the most notable were the discoveries of the oil medium applied in glazes, followed late in the 15th century by the development of canvases stretched over wooden supports. The print technologies of woodblock and engraving were also developed during the 15th century. Artists became increasingly skilled at bronze casting and stone carving. Renaissance artists also found new means for mapping reality on two-dimensional surfaces by using gridded perspective devices, and later employed such optical devices as the *camera obscura* and *camera lucida*. In the 19th century amateur chemists discovered light sensitive materials that would permanently fix light, what the early photographer Fox Talbot described as 'the pencil of



nature,' on a surface. Photography technologies led in turn to the discovery of film and later video. To these we have more recently added the power of digital media and global networks for the exchange of information (and art).

Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press led to the radical expansion of printed imagery. Print technology allowed artists to maximize the impact of a single design through reproduction. Although prints sold for less than oil paintings, the volume of sales compensated for the lower prices. At the same time, an artist's reputation could be enhanced by the wide distribution of his work in print as either reproductions or wholly independent themes.

Printed books also led to a radically increased the demand for paper, which lowered the cost of paper. During the second half of the 15th century artists' drawings on paper began to be appreciated as an independent art form. Collectors pursued drawings by the hand of famous artists in part because the drawings were perceived to be the most immediate, most intimate and personal reflection of the artist. Drawings and prints, because of their comparatively low cost, were media in which the most daring artistic innovations could first be pursued.

Technological innovations outside the domain of art often influenced artistic technological innovations in surprising ways. For example, prior to the 15th century bronze sculptures done in the round (as opposed to relief sculptures like those found on bronze doors throughout the later Middle Ages) were typically small works. Yet when we think of Renaissance sculpture in bronze many of the works that come to mind are life size or larger. What helped make this change in scale possible was something seemingly far removed from the world of art: warfare. Renaissance princes' demand for cannon may have had as an unintended byproduct large-scale sculptures in bronze. Europeans first used cannon in warfare around 1300, but only during the 15th century did cannon become common military hardware. Cannon were typically made in bronze until well into the 16th century. Their production involved complicated metallurgical and engineering skills. It is not surprising that some of the most skilled craftsmen and engineers of the day, that is to say, artists and architects, were enlisted to make cannon and comparable weapons. The connection went the other direction as well. The creation of bronze foundries large enough to produce the great Renaissance cannon could also be used to create sculptures on a scale not seen since antiquity. The grandest attempt of all perhaps was Leonardo da Vinci's giant horse, no less than 24 feet high, commissioned from the artist by Ludovico Sforza, duke of Milan. Leonardo worked on his statue for twenty years, but in the

end it was never cast. The duke chose instead to use the bronze promised to Leonardo to make cannon. And the artist's full-scale clay mold for the sculpture was destroyed by invading French troops, who reportedly used it for target practice.

Oil painting on canvas represents a far less spectacular feat of chemical and mechanical engineering than large bronze casting, but it has no rival in its impact on art production from the 15th century until well into the 20th century. Like many important innovations in science and technology, the necessary ingredients for oil painting had been around for a long time before the artistic potential of the medium was fully exploited. It was the generation of Jan van Eyck and his contemporaries, working in the wealthy Burgundian towns of Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp and other cities in modern day Belgium, however, who discovered the medium's potential to create convincing, highly detailed illusions of the world. They applied pigments suspended in an oil medium, typically linseed oil, in thin glazes to wooden panels that had been carefully smoothed and prepared with a white ground. Oil glazing permitted the artists to work slowly; the artist could work up their paintings over many days rather than a few hours. They built up the color and form of their images layer upon layer. Light penetrates these layered surfaces and is then reflected back outward, which gives such paintings a jewel-like luminosity and a richness of color. Van Eyck's paintings especially possess mirror-like surfaces, in which light and color appear to come from within the painting, rather than merely being illuminated by ambient lighting.

Painting on panel remained the preferred medium for artists working in Flanders and modern day Netherlands until well into the 17th century. If an artist wished to make a large panel, multiple boards could be carefully joined together and the surface smoothed accordingly. Large panel paintings were of course significantly heavier than smaller ones, which diminished their portability. Many large-scale panel paintings therefore were done on commission and were intended for specific, permanent locations, such as a church altar. Where portability was important, as in the case of private devotional imagery, small sized works prevailed. Northern European artists adhered to panel painting long after most Italian artists had abandoned its use in favor of painting on canvas because it offered certain advantages. Artists could exploit the smooth wood panels to give their paintings the brilliant, highly luminescent qualities of a mirror. Buyers of panel paintings may also have regarded such work as more permanent, less flimsy and 'cheap' looking than paintings on canvas. Panel painting's disadvantages include the need for artists to limit the amount of changes made in a composition, because older paint layers might show through the final revisions. These are



known as *pentimenti*. In addition to the oil medium, Northern European artists tended to use hard resins, such as amber, as varnishes to protect the painting and between paint layers. Such resins could easily build up the painting's surface and mar the final appearance. As a result, panel painting favored certain skills, such as careful pre-planning of the picture's composition and color choices, and a deliberate, slow paint application, which allowed for comparatively few revisions. Painstaking execution often meant that panel painters went to considerable lengths to hide the brushwork that created their illusions. Except on close examination, Northern European panel paintings can often appear to have very little surface texture, resembling the emulsion of the modern-day photograph.

As with oil, canvas was used as a painting support long before artists realized its potential. For much of the 15th century and presumably for some centuries earlier, paintings on canvas appear primarily to have been created for temporary purposes, such as decorations for a religious celebration or for an entry procession of a monarch into one of his towns or for the decorative application to furniture. We know that painters on canvas enjoyed less social standing among the community of craftsmen who formed artist guilds during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. This is perhaps one reason why the major innovators in painting in oil on canvas were initially Italian artists, where guild restrictions were less powerful. More importantly, even in Italy painting on canvas flourished in one place: the maritime city of Venice, where of course canvas was abundantly in use in the making of sails, a city known for its textile production and where the peculiar advantages of canvas could be employed to overcome the limitations of its damp climate. Whereas in the much dryer climate of towns like Florence painting in fresco was commonly employed to decorate the walls of churches and public buildings, in Venice fresco was subject to rapid decay. The painted plaster would simply flake off the wall. Canvas, because it absorbed the oil medium, was far less vulnerable to the humidity. Venetian artists could give canvas paintings the flat surface and crisp edges of panel paintings by stretching the canvas over wooden supports, what are called stretchers.

The advantages of painting in oil on canvas were not simply environmental. Canvases could be prepared in any size and shape with comparative ease and at costs at least competitive with panel makers, if not considerably cheaper. It also led to standardization in the size of canvases, an important feature if one considered the potential portability of works of art painted on canvas. The paintings' frames could be similarly standardized and made interchangeable. This meant that paintings could be shipped un-stretched across great distances and without

frames. Upon the painting's arrival, the buyer could then re-stretch the canvas and add a frame of one's own choosing. Not coincidentally, at the beginning of the 16th century Venice was the center of the book publishing industry in Europe. In a city already accustomed to the production of work made for foreign markets, painted canvases easily joined books as portable commodities.

There were technical advantages to oil painting on canvas as well. Because of the absorptive nature of canvas and its rougher texture, artists found it easier to simply paint over revisions rather than to wipe or scrape them away. Venetian painting thus became characterized by a more rapid mode of execution. Artists like Giorgione began to work without extensive preparatory drawings, simply sketching out the loose outlines of the painting's composition directly onto the painting's white ground and then working up the final appearance of the picture in the process of painting it. Giorgione and later Venetian artists like Titian and Veronese made extensive revisions to their compositions as they worked on them, covering over these changes in new layers of paint. Venetian artists also added more flexible resins to the oil medium than those used by their northern European counterparts, thereby obtaining much greater freedom with how they could apply paint to canvas. Venetian artists were able to create richly colored paintings comparable to their northern European contemporaries, but achieved these results through opaque rather than translucent paint layering. This much faster technique encouraged Venetian artists to allow the individual strokes of paint to remain more visible on the canvas surface. Over time Venetian artists helped change artistic tastes and made the presence of the artist's touch through the visible strokes of paint a virtue rather than a technical liability, as it was so often perceived to be by northern European panel painters and their audiences.

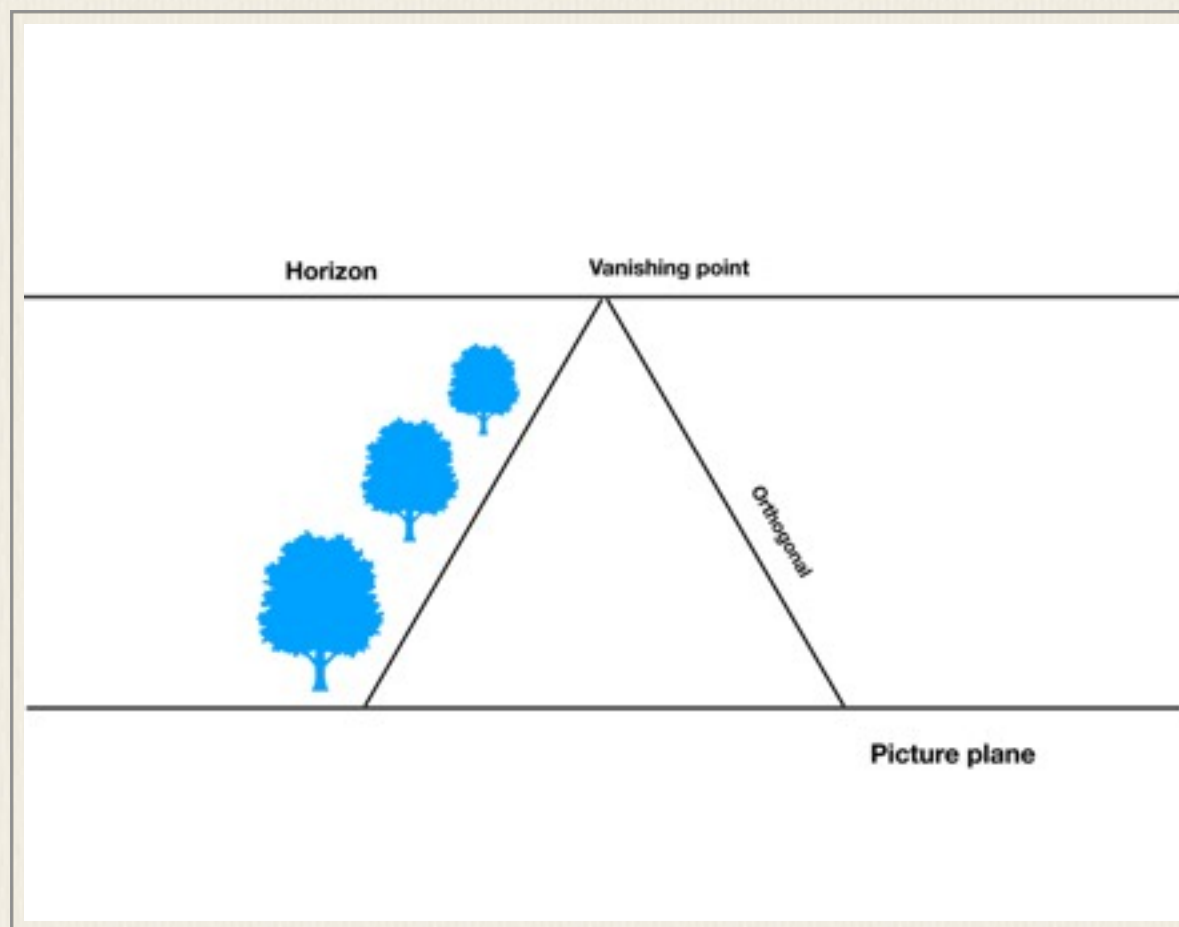
#### Linear perspective and the stage and mirror models of art

At the beginning of the fifteenth century there were two great art centers out of which much of the artistic vocabulary of what we call the Renaissance emerged: Florence and Bruges. Both cities were simply the most influential loci for wider artistic developments in Italy and Flanders respectively. Yet while there are important and diverse works of art being produced all over Europe in the 15th century the dichotomous relationship of these two centers is significant, both because of how they differently influenced other art centers at the time and because of the enduring influence their respective artistic traits had on the subsequent development for centuries afterwards of Italian and northern European art. It was apparent, even to 15th-century art audiences, that there were



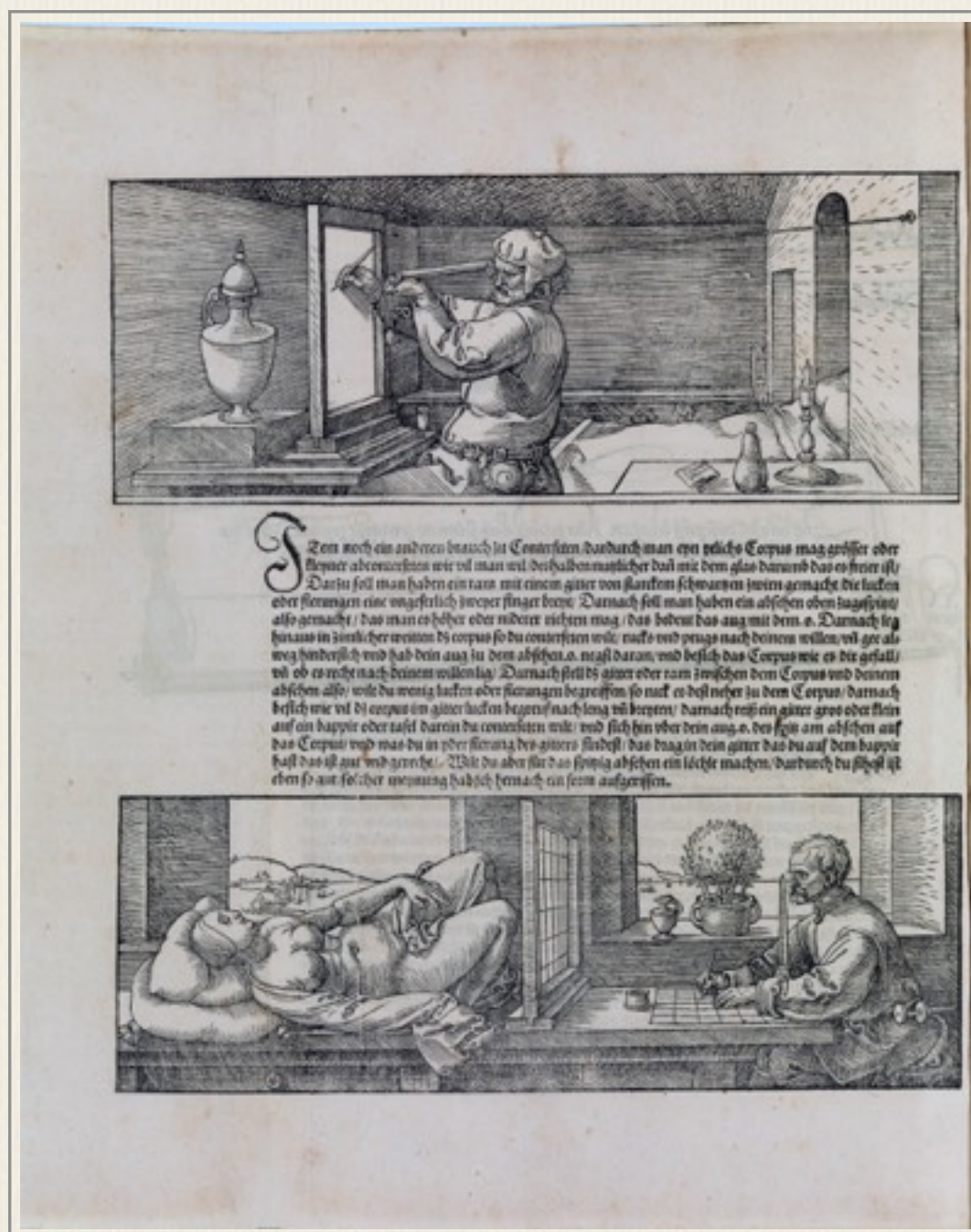
considerable differences between contemporary Florentine art and the art then being produced in Bruges (and other Flemish towns). Italian admirers of Flemish art emphasized the virtues of the new technique (oil painting) and the naturalism it made possible. The Flemish way of representing the world offered viewers both the minutiae of 15th-century interiors and the vast panorama of a world to be glimpsed so often through the windows of the depicted room. Italian observers of Flemish art also responded to the emphatic piety of most Flemish art, an emotional religious intensity that was immediate and intimate.

By contrast, Florentine painting and sculpture from the generation of



Masaccio and Donatello forward were grounded in linear perspective. This was the discovery of the great architect and mathematician Filippo Brunelleschi. It was a geometrical system for mapping three-dimensional recession on a two-dimensional surface. Linear perspective assumed a painting to be a kind of window, or perhaps more accurately, a stage, with its edges equivalent to a window frame or the wings. Everything seen through the window from a certain position would converge to a single point ('vanishing point') on the painting's depicted horizon through a kind of pyramidal recession. These real and implied lines of recession are called orthogonals and they are assumed to be at right angles to the surface of the painting (the picture plane).

Linear perspective allowed Italian artists to precisely 'map' or measure space, so that every depicted element in an image would be in



proper relative size (proportion) to every other element as they appear on the surface of the painting. The German painter and printmaker, Albrecht Dürer was such an admirer of these Italian discoveries that he published a lengthy treatise on perspective and proportion that not only laid out the geometry that governed the technique, but also illustrated devices that could be used to map a view of an object or a reclining figure within the quadrant of a painting (ills. #1.7).

Ills. #1.7 Albrecht Dürer, *Underweysung der Messung* (The Teaching of Measurement, Nuremberg, 1538, woodcut, 31.9 × 21.5 cm) Gift of Felix M. Warburg, 1918, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Linear perspective not only gave artists a topographic tool, it could be marshaled for a variety of pictorial effects. By shifting the location of the perspective pyramid, for example, artists could create either symmetrical compositions (preferred by most Italian artists throughout the 15th century) or asymmetrical compositions (see ill. #1.8). Perspective also established the exact position of the viewer in front of the image. So, by changing the location of the vanishing point within the image, one could adjust the ideal viewing position in front of it. In Andrea Mantegna's fresco depicting St. James being led to his martyrdom, the artist used linear perspective to place us below the scene, as if standing on a floor positioned above our heads. We look up into the great vaulted Roman arch. In this way, perspective could be used either to keep the





Ills. #1.8 Andrea Mantegna, Saint James Led to Martyrdom, ca. 1455 (destroyed in 1944), fresco, Ovetari Chapel, Padua

viewer at a distance from the image or bring the viewer intimately close to the action.

15th and early 16th-century Italian art is consistently more monumental than Flemish art of the same period. Many of the most impressive works that have survived from the Italian Renaissance are wall murals in churches and public edifices painted in the fresco medium. There are a variety of fresco techniques. One consists of mixing the color pigment in water and applying it to a fresh layer of plaster or mortar on the wall. The pigment is then absorbed into the rapidly drying plaster. Artists had to paint rapidly, since the plaster would dry within ten to twelve hours, limiting the time that could be devoted a fresh plastered portion of the wall. To get around these time constraints and the very limited possibilities for making revisions, artists also painted frescos using pigment suspended in egg yolk, glue or even oil and applied to a dried plaster wall. This technique was used sometimes over the top of a painting done in wet plaster. Its advantages were much slower drying



time, increased possibilities for making changes during the painting process, the use of larger variety of color, and greater color richness. In a third type of fresco the water-based color is applied to an almost dried wall; the color is not absorbed as deeply into the plaster. Because of the dry Mediterranean climate fresco was a popular painting medium in most Italian cities. Combined with linear perspective, frescos could imaginatively extend the space of a church interior and convey even to the most illiterate members of the community stories from the Old and New Testaments. Since the potential size of the frescos was only limited by the available wall space and since they encouraged rapid execution, Italian artists working in fresco generally painted simple, well-defined



Ills #1.9 Robert Campin (attributed), *The Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*, c. 1440, oil with egg tempera on oak, 63.4 x 48.5 cm The National Gallery, London (and detail of window)

forms in large scale, which led to their feeling of monumentality. Similarly, fresco discouraged artists from filling their pictures with too much detail. Individual elements were sacrificed to the overall clarity of the scene being portrayed. No matter how close the depicted figure is



to the viewer, the absence of detail makes the figure appear at a distance, in some almost intangible way removed from our world (which contrasts to the intimate connection between viewer and art object created by Flemish artists) Because Italian Renaissance artists adopted a 'stage' model approach to painting, they created effectively self-contained worlds inside the stage's frame. In Renaissance Italian art there is usually little sense of a larger world beyond the depicted scene. Conversely, Northern European images typically imply that there is a vast world beyond the scene depicted, usually glimpsed through a window. Northern European artists suggest that what we are seeing in these paintings is just what happens to be before us. If we could but move our position a little we'd be able to see the larger world that lies beyond the painting's edges (ills. #1.9). Oil painting possesses almost the diametrically opposite properties of fresco painting. Oil is visually a much richer and more flexible medium than fresco. It became the ideal means to explore the properties of light (as opposed to the Italian interest in rationally constructed space) and the particularity of the everyday world. Since few accounts of artists and their practices survive from this period, we can only speculate as to why Jan van Eyck and his contemporaries were the first to discover the full range of oil painting's possibilities. Among the possible explanations for their adaptation of this technology is of a theological and philosophical nature. There was a school of thought that flourished in late medieval and early Renaissance northern Europe that held that reality and God's presence in the world must be experienced through the senses: the world is as we can see it, touch it, smell it. Such writers drew inspiration from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who believed that knowledge was acquired best through observation.

A very different idea of knowledge tended to prevail among intellectual circles in Italy. There the widely held view was that the essence of the world is invisible, that it lies outside the senses, and can best be discovered through the underlying principles that govern and order the world. For example, mathematics was taken to be one of the highest forms of human knowledge and one most close to the divine because it permitted one to see relationships otherwise invisible to the eye. Numbers do not exist in nature. These Italian intellectuals were often inspired by another Greek philosopher, Plato, and so were called neo-Platonists.

Therefore one explanation for the stylistic differences between northern and Italian 15th-century Renaissance art beyond these matters of technique and materials is that 15th-century Flemish artists, and later northern European artists who followed in their tradition, tended to want to paint the external and particular appearance of the world. The oil

medium gave them the technical means to do so. Conversely, Italian artists were interested in discovering underlying structures that governed the world of appearances, and their art tended to generalize and idealize things, and especially to idealize the human body. One might say that the medium in early Renaissance Italian art was secondary to the mathematics.

Another possible explanation for the highly particularized realism of 15th-century Flemish painting, as well as its comparatively sudden transformation, may owe much to an external technological innovation: the development of blown glass mirrors. While the use of glass for mirrors appears to date from as early as the 11th century, it was only sometime in the mid-14th century that Venetian glass blowers (blown glass was itself a 14th-century innovation) perfected a method of filling a molten bulb of glass with a tin-mercury compound. When the glass cooled it could be cut into a shallow bowl, producing a round, convex mirror. Prior to this innovation, most people, if they possessed mirrors at all, relied on mirrors using highly polished metals. Metal mirrors lacked the brilliance and clarity of the new glass mirrors. Because Venice jealously guarded the secrets of their mirror-making techniques, glass mirrors remained an expensive and highly valued commodity until well into the 17th century. Possession of such mirrors clearly was a sign of social status and one finds them frequently featured on the walls of 15th-century Flemish paintings of interiors. I would argue that the mirrors offered a new standard of realism against which the painters competed (and interestingly, almost never in 15th-century Italian art), just as they were also objects of considerable fascination for artists. They were challenged to replicate the visual distortions produced by the convex mirrors they depicted in their paintings, sometimes with remarkable accuracy. This is why I describe Flemish art as subscribing to the mirror model of art. Flemish artists effectively tried to do in painting what these convex mirrors did: to create microscopically detailed, bright, richly colored and highly polished surfaces, saturated with light.

For Italian artists, light was primarily used to model form and to isolate one feature of the composition from another. Light in this sense defines differences and articulates spaces rather than seeks unities between things. One might say that early Italian Renaissance art lacks 'atmosphere.' This is also one of the reasons why, when standing before 15th-century Italian painting, we always feel ourselves to be separate from the scene depicted. We are in front of, not within the scene, separated from the depicted world as we are when we look through a window, or as an audience is separated from actors on a stage (ills. #1.10). In



contrast, 15th-century Flemish artists, took advantage of the luminosity of the oil-based medium to allow light to envelop and connect the various



Ills. #1.10 Fra Angelico, Saint Lawrence Distributing Alms, c. 1445-49, fresco, 271 x 200 cm, Chapel of Pope Nicholas V, Vatican Palace, Vatican City

elements of the depicted scene. In paintings by artists like Robert Campin (ills. #1.9) we can observe how light is reflected or refracted or absorbed by the different surfaces of the objects it encounters. Flemish artists lovingly depicted the different textures of things, from velvet to fur-line collars to smooth, reflective glass. And because the world is so often rendered in almost microscopic detail, to look at the best 15th-century painting is like submerging oneself within its world, as if the depicted scene is somehow coextensive with our own.

### Showing versus telling

On the stage created by linear perspective Italian artists preferred to tell stories, to act out Biblical (and later mythological) narratives as if the depicted bodies were actors momentarily arrested while performing a play for which the audience already knew its beginning, middle, and end. For Italian artists composition meant the arrangement of human bodies in space; the environment was often like painted scenery, largely un-integrated with the human figures in the foreground.

Because Italian artists concentrated on the human body within a religious, mythological or historical narrative, these are the genres that dominated Italian art from the 14th century to the early 18th century. The other major genres—genre imagery, landscape, and still life—were much more important and more elaborately developed in northern Europe than in Italy. In a sense, one could argue that each of them developed directly out of the religious art of late 14th- and early 15th-century northern Europe. During the late Middle Ages, elaborately illustrated manuscripts were much in demand by the kings of France and the dukes of Burgundy and other northern nobility, and were commissioned for their private enjoyment. And in these books French and Flemish manuscript illuminators created vividly illusionistic illustrations.

Just looking at the February calendar page (ills. #1.11) alone from the Limbourg Brothers' famous book of hours, *Les Très Riches Heures*, made for the Duke of Berry early in the 15th century, it is easy to imagine how the Duke would have been both inspired by the religious scenes depicted elsewhere in the manuscript and entertained by the subtle and many faceted details of the calendar scenes. February is represented as a wintry landscape; peasants take shelter from the cold in a house, shown without a facing wall so that we can see inside, and a woodsman chops wood to feed the hearths of peasant and lord alike. The Limbourg brothers attempted not only to convey what the times of the year looked like but even what they felt like. They show us a woman who covers her face against the cold, her breath clearly visible. We even see the genitalia of the couple on a bench by the fire, as they spread their legs to warm their bodies. As hand-held objects, the owner was invited to pour over these scenes; the illuminators rewarded their patrons with intricate depictions of the everyday world. In this way, manuscript illuminators like the Limbourg brothers probably helped to create as well as to satisfy the taste in northern courts for richly observed views of everyday life. Moreover, scholars believe that there is considerable overlapping between the earliest painters in oil, like Jan van Eyck, and the manuscript illuminators. Scholars believe that van Eyck and other northern European



artists at the beginning of the 15th century produced works in both mediums. Consequently both the taste for and the skill to create elaborate



Ills. #1.11, Herman, Paul and Jean de Limbourg, February, from Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, 1413-16, ink on vellum, Musée Condé, Chantilly

and detailed depictions of contemporary life carried over from the manuscripts into 15th-century Flemish paintings in oil.

15th-century Flemish art is not wholly devoid of narration, but as a rule Flemish artists preferred to show things rather than to tell stories about them. Consequently, they relied more heavily than did their Italian counterparts on symbolism, in which objects possess specific, usually theological meanings, which would have been understood by the viewer. In this way, simple things, from fruit and flowers to candles and furniture ornaments, could be saturated with symbolic, religious meaning. Flemish



painting consequently often expresses a surprising religious intensity, because the everyday world artists depicted was at the same time infused with sacred significations.

Much of the art produced in the Flemish towns during the 15th century also possess a striking intimacy. This owes both the minuteness with which their artists portrayed the visible world and to the physical size



Ills. #1.12 Robert Campin, Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece), c. 1427-32, oil on panel, 64.5 x 117.8 cm, The Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

of these works. The most common type of painted object that has come down to us is the small, folding altarpiece, consisting of two (diptych) or three (triptych) panels, connected by hinges and often painted on both sides. Typically little more than a foot tall, these images may have been commissioned for private chapels in churches or more likely served as private devotional altars for wealthy clientele who wished to worship in their homes. Frequently these portable altars possess portraits of the patron on one panel, who witnesses the religious scene depicted on the other one or two panels. Since the patron would be praying in front of their own image (as well as the religious subject) it is possible that such images were regarded as having magical, talisman-like properties, to bring one physically as well as spiritually under the protection of God. These minutely depicted altars invited the close and presumably private contemplation of their owners. In the Mérode Altarpiece attributed to Robert Campin, the three panels provide us with the nascent elements of four of the major genres to develop in the 15th century: 1) portraiture, represented by the donor portraits in the left wing of the altar; 2) still



life, exemplified by the center panel, where, between the angel of the Annunciation and the Virgin Mary sits a table upon which, very much like later still lifes, an open Bible, a candle in a candlestick, and a decorated pitcher containing a lily; 3) genre imagery, in which Joseph the Carpenter is shown in his shop in the right panel fashioning mousetraps; and 4) landscape, which appears behind Joseph as a view out on to a Flemish street.

The basic economic and technological differences that distinguished Italian from Flemish (and more generally Northern European) art in the 15th century continued to effect the respective art practices of the two regions until well into the 17th century. Italian patrons were quicker to develop a taste for the art of Flanders than the reverse. Painting in oil, and the adjacent visual qualities, achieved universal currency in Western Europe by the end of the 15th century. However, the qualities of monumental Italian painting in fresco, for the very lack of portability, did not make significant inroads with Northern patrons. Only when Venetian artists developed the technique of painting in oil on canvas did Italian artistic conventions significantly impact artists and their patrons north of the Alps. And it was really only at the end of the 16th century that European art became truly internationalized. This occurred through the development of a resale market for what we might now call "old Master" art, works typically painted in oil on canvas, and derived second-hand via dealers and similar agents, that had been created by artists now long dead. Almost overnight large *Kunstkammer* (art rooms) were formed by royal collectors like the English king Charles I and by lesser nobility and rich merchants. And when this happened, the art collections were composed of all the genres, in a manner that fundamentally changed the way art was being used. Increasingly the sacred purposes of art making and collecting gave way to something we might now call exhibition art. That is to say, art came increasingly to be consumed for visual pleasure rather than for its theological and political meanings, although these certainly persist even in art made today. With exhibition art, all the major genres came fully into maturity.

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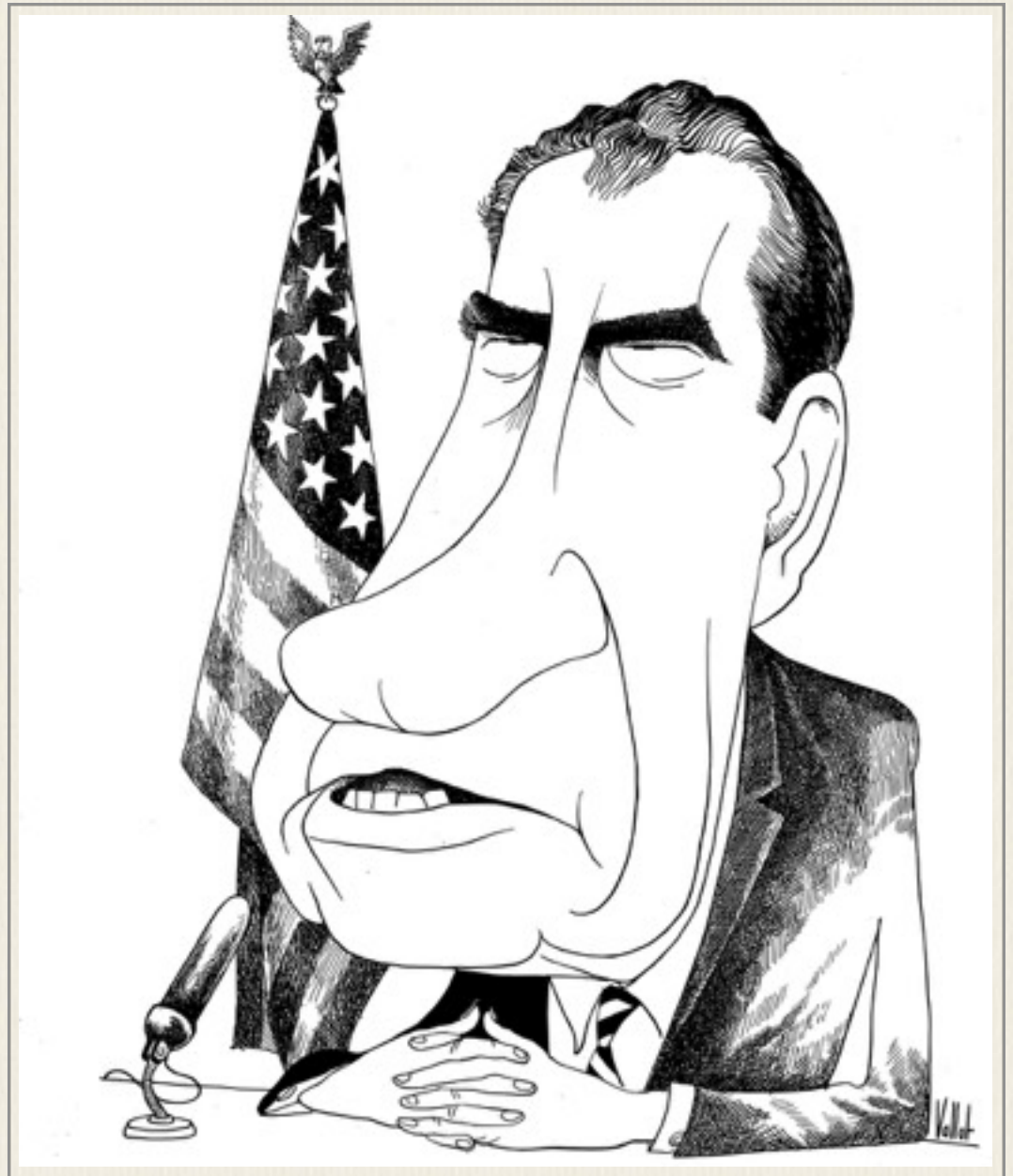




## On Portraits

### The Mask and the face

Generally we mean by a portrait the representation of a person, although occasionally artists have made portraits of specific animals (usually dogs or horses). To represent someone does not mean, however, that the physical characteristics of that person are carefully and exactly reproduced. Nor does it mean that when the physical characteristics are closely reproduced this will result in a portrait. While portrait representations often preserve a 'likeness' of an individual, they are not necessarily the same thing. We tend to think of 'likeness' as the physical features of a person, but it is often the case that 'likeness' is far from being an exact representation of an individual's face and body. Likenesses may be achieved through surprisingly simple schema, such as those used in cartoons. Even a poor student of recent American history would be able to identify which President the cartoonist is satirized in this image.



Ills. #2.1 Edmund Valtmann (Vallot), *Richard Nixon*, c. 1970, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

E. H. Gombrich has described the physical appearance of an individual, hair coloring, skin qualities, size and shape of nose, etc. as a person's

'face.' From infancy humans acquire the ability to recognize other individuals (like one's mother) based on visual cues provided by such features. This pattern recognition persists even when the face is at its most mobile (laughing, crying). And it is such characteristic facial and body features that cartoonists (and all portrait artists) exploit to create portrait likenesses. While artists and cartoonists self-consciously use this visual skill, it is one we all employ to identify those people we know from those we don't.



Ills. #2.2 Richard Nixon, Office White House photograph c. 1969, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Many people assume that photographs offer the highest degree of 'likeness' because photographs contain a very high degree of information about the person being photographed (ills. #2.2). Yet even photographs are not necessarily reflective of what we perceive a person to be like, that is, not how a person looks (their 'face'), but how we perceive the person to be (their identity). Perceptions of a person's identity typically are generalized responses to a person acquired over time through numerous observations. We also have perceptions of a person's identity based on what we perceive the person to be feeling at a particular moment. This is what we call their 'expression.' So, for example, when a news agency selects a particular photograph of a famous person to illustrate a textual report, such as a photograph of former President Nixon (ills. #2.3), that choice is determined by a variety of factors that are not necessarily related to 'likeness.' The agency's editors might ask: Is this a good photograph (is it well lit, does it have a good composition, etc.)? But they would also ask whether the photograph, via expression and/or setting, reflects on the person well or badly. If one wants to praise Nixon one might choose a 'flattering' portrait, like this photograph of Nixon on the campaign trail; if one wants to denigrate the man one might choose a 'unflattering' portrait. So an important part of the identity conveyed by a photograph, especially of a famous person, is whether or not the expression caught in the photograph is dignified or comic, whether it could be seen as neutral (presumably objective) or biased. The choice of photographs to reproduce reflects what the chooser perceives the person to be like and/or wants the viewer to perceive the person to be like. Therefore, when confronted with a portrait, even when the portrait is a photograph, it is always difficult to say whether or not



the representation is actually indicative of what the person is 'really like.'

There is much more to the perception of a person's identity than simply the ability to tell Mom from Aunt Martha. These other qualities of a person achieved through representation is what Gombrich has called the



Ills. #2.3 Ollie Atkins, Richard Nixon on the campaign trail in Paoli, PA, July 1968, George Mason University Libraries, Fairfax, Virginia

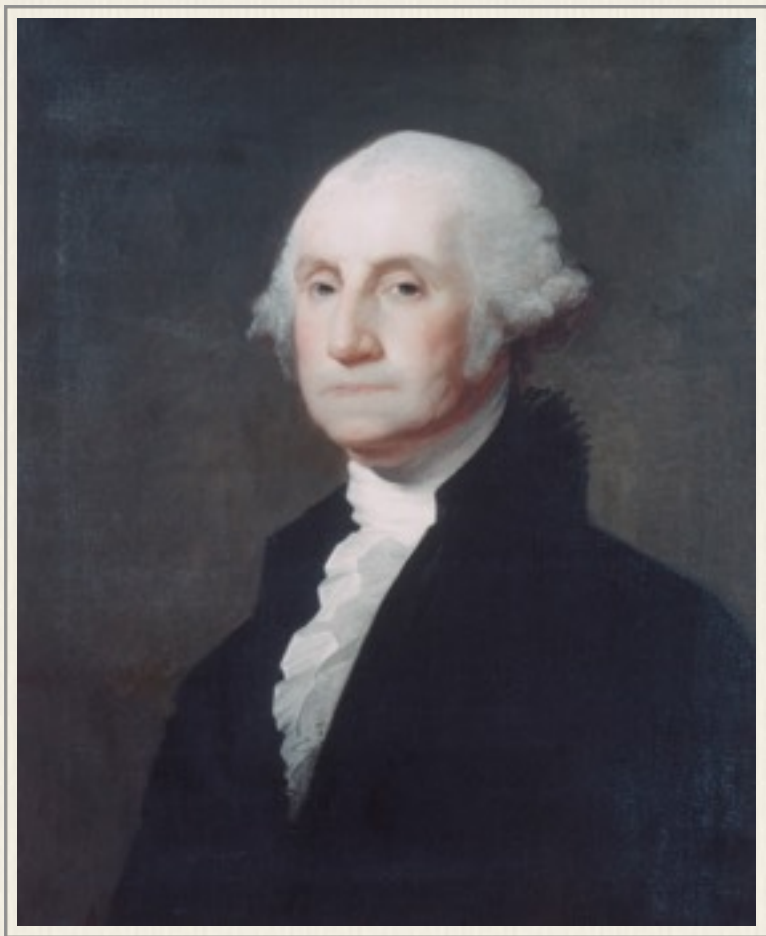
individual's 'mask.' The 'mask' is not what a person looks like, but what we perceive the person, including ourselves, to be. It is important to understand that masks are constructed for us, as well as by us.

Point a camera at a child accustomed to being photographed and she will likely immediately assume the pose and the face of someone being photographed (ills. #2.4). Similarly a sitter 'poses' for a painted portrait, assuming a certain demeanor and positioning of the body to create whatever is the desired effect, such as showing off one's physical attributes to their best advantage, or conveying the impression of authority or power or spirituality or a host of other possible qualities that might enhance the sitter's status before a targeted audience. Some of these qualities the



Ills. #2.4

sitter may indeed innately possess and are dutifully conveyed by the artist; but equally these qualities may be made up, or exaggerated, to create the desired effect. Other attributes less flattering or distracting from the intended message might be eliminated.



Ills. #2.5 Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington*, c. 1803, oil on canvas, 74 x 61.3 cm, gift of H.O. Havemeyer, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Typically, the work that goes into producing the specific desired qualities contained in a portrait representation is not immediately visible to the viewer. That is to say, if the portrait is any good, the viewer's response may be simply to take the representation at face value (here is a portrait of George Washington, for example), and not to think about what is and what is not being said about the President in the image (see ills. #2.5). Washington's biographers have long point out how the founding President wore false teeth most of his adult life and that they were both uncomfortable and unflattering, which obviously embarrassed him. It is not surprising then that Washington's many portraitists invariably rendered the man with closed mouth and thin, almost pinched lips.

We have become so accustomed to this severe version of Washington that it is a surprising joke to see a smiling version of the man achieved by vertically folding a dollar bill (ills. #2.6). Conversely, the seriousness of Washington's expression conveyed in all the portraits made of him by his contemporaries is consistent with





Ills. #2.6

the attributes of  
sobriety, self-  
possession, and  
personal dignity  
we would hope one  
of our most  
honored  
Presidents would  
possess. Most  
people would find

it easier to trust and admire Gilbert Stuart's 'mask' of Washington than this re-envisioning of a now smiling Washington that adorns this carefully folded dollar bill.

The 'masks' people wear and the poses they assume when their portraits are being made take many forms and have many purposes. Masks often come in the form of types, a particular role or identity assigned to people based on common characteristics, such as their profession (we associate certain attributes with lawyers, others with dentists, still others with doctors, and so on), ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender. Such roles often carry particular postures or costumes or expressions that are popularly identified with the type in question. In this sensitive painting (ills. #.2.7) by the Austrian artist Isidore Kaufmann, a young Jewish man from Eastern Europe is set against a textured wall hanging with a prominent text in Hebrew. In multiple ways, Kaufmann does everything possible to assert the ethnic identity of his sitter—in such a picture, establishing ethnic identity is largely the artist's point. In this case, the painter is actually engaged in a form of ethnography.



Ills. #2.7 Isidor Kaufmann, *Man With Fur Hat*, c. 1910, Oil on panel, 41 x 31 cm, The Jewish Museum, NY

When images of people appear to us as too fixed or too simplified, we tend to view them as stereotypes. It is difficult to distinguish between types and stereotypes other than to say that a stereotype somehow makes a judgment about a type. Take, for example, fashion models, one of the most common masks we see every day in online and television advertising (ills. #2.8). The fashion model is subject to stereotyping: models are often perceived to be shallow and empty-headed, narcissistic and spoiled. But

the business of the model and those who assist in creating the model's image is almost always directed toward producing a particular type of representation, that is to say, the image of a person possessed with the aura of glamour. Fashion models are a physical type, almost always tall and thin, mostly young and always attractive. Models learn to walk and present themselves in particular, highly coded ways. The desired effect is to appear not only attractive, but exciting as well.



ills. #2.8 Olive Cotton, *Only to taste the warmth, the light, the wind*, c. 1939  
gelatin silver photograph, purchased with funds provided by John Armati 2006,  
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Glamour's purpose is to help arouse desire for whatever the model is being used to sell. Similarly, the men and women who model, or play roles, in the porn industry take on postures and identities that are intended to make them attractive and exciting, and something else as well: to arouse sexual desire, which is realized through fantasy. In both advertising and pornography the producers of the images do not expect their audiences to regard the models as specific people. Instead, they are to be viewed as types, upon which the viewer can project one's own



identity (e.g., if I buy these Gap clothes I'll be the same as, look as good as, the person in the Gap ad) or one's fantasies. Both are also obviously equally subject to stereotyping.

Occasionally, some fashion model or porn star may become so famous that the individual acquires name recognition. Such celebrity recognition is often then used to enhance the attractiveness of the products being sold. It's also why movie stars, pop stars, and sports stars are so often used in advertising. Already made glamorous because of their other careers, these celebrities convey glamour for any product with which they are associated, even when it is Michael Jordon hawking Hanes underwear. Yet when 'stars' market a product they do so within their identity as glamorous stars, not as the 'real' person behind the 'star' image.

The fashion industry has little interest in showing how the image-makers and their models collaborate to produce various kinds of meaning. Even videos of fashion photo shoots attempt to sustain the glamour of the models, rather than to demystify them and to depict them as 'regular' people. By contrast, the history of Western art since the end of the medieval period offers numerous examples of artists reflecting on the relationship between artist and model and on how meanings are produced through these relationships.

A popular genre in Western painting, for example, is that of the artist and model in the studio. In most of these images, the posing sitter or sitters and their painted representations are made to be identical. For example, in the painting by the 15th-century German artist Derick Baegert, the Virgin and Child depicted being painted in the picture below are exactly the same as the painting on which the artist is working (ills. #2.9). Neither the painter nor his model is 'real' in this image. No one could know what the Virgin actually looked like. Derick Baegert's Virgin is an idealized version of a beautiful, aristocratic, 15th-century woman. St. Luke, who was one of the four authors of the first four books of the New Testament, is also presented as a modern (that is, a 15th-century) artist. Old master artists often chose the subject of St. Luke because, according to an apocryphal story dating from late antiquity, St. Luke was reported to have painted the Virgin's portrait with the help of divine inspiration. Ever after, St. Luke was the patron saint of artists. Artists' guilds, which were trade organizations, were frequently known as 'guilds of St. Luke.'

Baegert's painting, therefore, is not a portrait, but rather a depiction of the art of making portraits. Yet it is possible that Baegert used his own features for the face of St. Luke. Note how St. Luke's face is highly individualized and unflattering especially compared to the very





generalized, idealized features of the Virgin. It was not uncommon for artists at this time to identify with sacred models to signify their piety. If Baegert placed himself in his picture he was making a complex gesture that might be understood both as self-aggrandizement (advertising his skills as an artist) and as an act of humility and religious devotion (imagining himself as the patron saint of all artists paying homage to the Mother of God).

Ills. #2.9 Derick Baegert, *St. Luke Painting the Madonna*, c. 1485 oil on panel, 116 x 86 cm, Westfälischer Kunstverein

Occasionally, artists have also addressed the difference between the 'reality' of the model and the 'fiction' of the painted representation. One of the most famous examples of this is the 17th century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*. Vermeer depicts the artist at work painting a model who stands before a window. Like Baegert's painting, Vermeer's picture has the artist working on a painting that differs from the one we see; our picture contains both the model and the artist in his studio. Vermeer's model is dressed as Clio, the muse of history, which we know because she is depicted with various objects associated with history: she wears a laurel wreath, an ancient form of honoring famous artistic, political and military figures; in one hand she supports a trumpet, signifying fame; and in the other she holds a book, in which historical events are recorded and preserved for posterity. Where Vermeer departs from Baegert's example is that in Vermeer's painting the model does not become Clio, unlike the woman, if there was one, who posed for Baegert's Virgin. Instead, Vermeer's woman remains a model dressed as



Clio. And against what is usual in such pictures the artist has his back to us, therefore making him anonymous as well. A particular woman probably did pose for Vermeer's picture, but the artist never intended his model to be seen as a specific person.



Ills. #2.10 Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, c. 1666-68, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



As with fashion models and porn stars, occasionally the artist's model becomes for some reason important enough that that his or her identity has



Ills. #2.11, Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saskia as Flora*, 1634, oil on canvas, 125 x 101 cm,  
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

been preserved. When this happens it sometimes results in images in which we are uncertain as to whether the artist is treating the known model as a person (having their portrait made) or as a model (pretending to be someone else). For example, this often happens in the paintings by the 17th-century Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn, who frequently used family members as models for his pictures. It is unclear, when Rembrandt painted his first wife Saskia in the guise of the goddess of spring, *Flora* (ills. #2.11), whether he intended the public to see the painting as a portrait or as a mythological picture, whether Rembrandt painted *Flora* for himself or for an unknown buyer, and if it were for an unknown buyer, whether he would have wanted the purchaser of *Flora* to know that the model for this picture was actually the artist's wife.

As works of art are passed down from generation to generation, the identity of the person posing, who may once have been well known, is often lost. This also happens with poorly or unlabeled collections of family photos. Over time, as the older members of the family die off, the



ability to identify the persons populating these images fades. So the history of art has left us with many paintings that can only be labeled as 'portrait of a man' or 'portrait of a woman.' Sometimes, with particularly famous works of art, debates arise over the identity of the person or persons depicted, and whether or not the represented person was intended to be a nameless model or once had significance as a specific individual.



Ills. #2.12 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, c. 1534, oil on canvas, 119 x 165 cm.  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

We see this uncertainty at work in many kinds of artworks. The Venetian artist Titian appears to have used the same model for a number of his pictures painted during the mid-1530s, including one of his most famous works, *The Venus of Urbino*, c. 1537 (ills. #2.12). There are at least three other pictures that feature this model, all three quarter length depictions. Two of these (one in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and the other in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna) have a similar erotic charge as the *Venus of Urbino*, depicting the model with one breast exposed; in only one painting is the model fully dressed.

This last picture (ills. #2.13) is popularly known as *La Bella* or *The Beauty* and belonged to the Duke of Urbino. His son in turn commissioned Titian to paint the *Venus of Urbino*. It has long been suggested that



Titian took for models Venetian courtesans, in other words, high-class prostitutes, and that this model could have been such a woman. Artists, we believe, often used prostitutes as models, especially for studies of



the female nude; through such arrangements the artist avoided conventional moral issues while the prostitute supplemented her income. Viewed in this light, *La Bella* and the other two half-length pictures might be considered portraits of a courtesan. But if they are 'portraits' does it not follow that the *Venus of Urbino* is also a portrait? Or, to put this question in opposite terms, is it not in fact the case that in all four paintings the model, whether she was a courtesan or not, was chosen by the artist for her particular beauty and not because of herself?

Ills. #2.13 Titian, *La Bella*, c. 1536, oil on canvas, 100 x 75 cm Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina e Appartamenti Reali, Florence

If so, Titian's patrons, father and son, and presumably Titian himself, viewed this woman not as a person, but more or less as an ideal beauty. Viewed this way, none of these paintings should be thought of as 'portraits' even if they were accurate likenesses of Titian's model.

At about the time that Titian painted the *Venus of Urbino* and these other pictures, he received a commission to paint the portrait of the great Renaissance art collector Isabella d'Este (ills. #2.14), who incidentally was the Duke of Urbino's mother-in-law (and grandmother-in-law to the owner of the *Venus of Urbino*). Isabella was about seventy-years-old at the time. When she rejected Titian's first effort as not





Ills. #2.14, Titian, *Isabella d'Este* c. 1534-36, oil on canvas  
102 × 64 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

being flattering enough, the artist painted another portrait of her, following her request that she be painted as a young woman. To do this, Titian employed the basic features of the model for the *Venus of Urbino*. Isabella's portrait has a more serious demeanor and lacks the enticing gaze of the *Venus* model, but the shape of her eyes, mouth, nose, and the precise placement of her hair all are closely borrowed from the *Venus* model (the very features that are repeated in the three other paintings of the same model). Isabella happily accepted this vastly more flattering image, but one can only wonder whether she knew that her 'portrait' shared basically the same face of the Duke of Urbino's *Venus*? What would Isabella have thought of inhabiting the face of a woman who was possibly of a prostitute, no matter how beautiful she was?

Art history gives us many comparable examples where the identification of the model is not only impossible to establish, but because of this uncertainty, the subject as well as the purpose of the work of art is in doubt, even if originally it may have been perfectly clear who was being depicted and why. Of course, there are many more portraits whose sitters can be firmly identified and therefore, whose 'masks,' the roles the sitters perform in their portraits, can be clearly described.

### The social function of portraiture

From the end of the classical world around the fifth century until beginning of the fifteenth century portraits were as rare as they later became common. Medieval portraits tended only to be of very important people and such portraits primarily conveyed the majesty and sovereignty of the individual depicted rather than a likeness. The transition from generic portrait images of power to portraits of likeness happened quite abruptly at the beginning of the 15th century. There is no one clear explanation for why portraiture advanced so rapidly in such a short period of time, but what we do know is that portraits initially developed quite differently in Italy than in northern Europe.

As suggested in chapter one, mirrors may have inspired artists in northern Europe to create images that closely matched their reflective power. What was most easily and most commonly captured in a mirror was the human face. In addition, one could only achieve a mirror-like detail and luminosity through the medium of oil painting, which is why one doesn't see a comparable development in Italy, where mirrors of course were equally available. Another factor that led to the popularity of portraiture in Flanders appears to have been the wave of religious reform that swept Northern Europe at this time. Late in the 14th century, two Flemish clerics advocated a set of private devotional practices that focused on Christ's humanity rather than his divinity. They called upon the pious to emulate Christ's humility and to empathize especially with his suffering. These religious reforms encouraged the production of private devotional art that characterized 15th-century Flemish culture. These small altarpieces, in either triptych or diptych format, very often included the image of the person who paid for work, what art historians refer to as the artwork's 'donor'. Typically, as in this diptych (ills. #2.15) commissioned by a man named Maarten van Nieuwenhove (who was 23 at the time), the donor was depicted on a separate panel from the divine image. Imagine the Nieuwenhove portrait, not as it is reproduced here, lying flat next to the Madonna panel, but as a three-dimension object, that slightly folded on its hinges would stand self-supported on an altar.





Ills. #2.15 Hans Memling, *Maarten van Nieuwenhove diptych*, 1487, oil on panel, 85.4 x 70 cm approx., Old St. John's Hospital, Bruges

Positioned in this way, Nieuwenhove would gaze much more directly at the Virgin and Christ child in the panel across from him.

The presence of the donor's image in such close proximity to the divine image is more than a little mysterious, since we can only assume that the person who prayed before these small altars was the same person depicted on the altar. Perhaps such images were understood to be talismans, possessing supernatural powers. Maarten van Nieuwenhove's closeness to the Virgin and Christ Child might attest not only to his faith—he is after all shown in the act of prayer—but may have also been thought to provide some protection in life or some reassurance of the Virgin's intervention on behalf of the donor's soul after death. At the very least, the close proximity of the donor's portrait to the divine image reiterated in physical form the ambitions of the religious reformers to make the religious experience as immediate, as real to the individual, as possible.

The vast majority of 15th-century northern European portraits were relatively small, rarely more than a foot in height (the Nieuwenhove portrait is somewhat grand, being somewhat over 17 inches in height). This may have had something to do with the way in which portraits were displayed and stored. Today we just assume that all paintings are intended to hang on walls. But with 15th-century Flemish portraits it was



far more likely that they were designed to be stored in chests when not in use. And for viewing, they may often simply have been held in one's hand.

The Flemish portrait format developed from the isolated head to a bust of the sitter, usually showing the sitter's hands. Demonstrating a sophisticated knowledge of foreshortening, Flemish artists typically depicted the sitter's features in three-quarter view. In most cases, the sitter looks away from the viewer. The half-turned face creates the sensation of movement, as if the sitter were just turning away or turning toward the viewer. Combined with the highly particularized rendering of the face the three-quarter view enhances these pictures' life-likeness. And because the sitter's gaze is most often directed off to the side in these portraits, scholars presume that single panel portraits in this format typically belonged to diptychs (like the Nieuwenhove diptych), that had subsequently been taken apart and sold separately. As in the Nieuwenhove diptych, most often a portrait was paired with a religious image, but later it became more common to be paired with another portrait, typically that of the sitter's wife or husband.

In Italy, the rise of portraiture has largely been connected to the Renaissance humanist's desire to have one's deeds and one's identity recorded for posterity. Renaissance humanism began in Italy and spread to the rest of Europe by the 16th century as a cultural and educational reform movement that sought to create better citizens by educating them to speak and write clearly and effectively, by giving them knowledge of ancient literature, art, philosophy, and history, and by providing them with models of moral behavior that emphasized virtue, prudence, and self-discipline. Because of the widespread popularity of humanist education, many members of the Italian upper classes, not just aristocrats, but also wealthy businessmen (and sometimes women) read about the accomplishments of ancient heroes and historical figures, and sought to emulate them, or at least to strive to gain some measure of long-lasting fame through, among other things, the commissioning of portraits.

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Ills. #2.16, Pisanello, *Portrait of Leonello d'Este*, c. 1444 tempera on panel, 26 x 18 cm, Bergamo, Accademia Carrara and gold coin with head of Augustus Caesar, c. 5 C.E., British Museum

Although three-quarter views of sitters can be found in early 15th-century Italian art, for most of the century artists and their sitters often chose a strict profile format (see ill. 2.16). They were emulating the images of famous men that could still be seen on ancient Greek and Roman coins and cameos that survived from antiquity, avidly collected by Italian humanists. The profile view has the additional effect of isolating the sitter from the viewer and it creates a much more formal and stylized quality than the life-likeness of contemporary Flemish portraits, a kind of dignity in keeping with the moral instruction of a humanist education. Such profile images also appear to set the person outside of a specific place and time, preserving, like the ancient coins, the face of the Renaissance patron for posterity.

Portrait fashions in both Northern Europe and Italy began to change toward the end of the 15th century. A secular quality asserted itself even



in such overly pious portraits as the Nieuwenhove diptych. While the artist's purpose in painting an elaborate setting for his sitting initially may have been to provide opportunities to insert elaborate religious symbol imagery into the portraits, as in the case of the Nieuwenhove portrait, the environment seems to refer as much or more to the identity of the sitter as to any particular religious message. This secular trend increased when Flemish portraits began to be widely imitated by Italian artists in the later 15th century. Italian artists borrowed from Flemish portraiture such elements as the three-quarter face, the use of objects and environments to define the sitter, and, perhaps above all else, the oil medium. To these ingredients Italian portrait painters added increased size, especially after the innovation of oil painting on canvas was widely adopted. Since Italian artists were not tied to the private devotional diptych format used in Flanders and since painting on canvas encouraged widespread experimentation in portraiture's sizes and formats, by the mid-16th century life-size or near life-size portraits set in complex environments were common. After 1500 portraits quickly evolved from the portrait bust format to three-quarter and full-length figure portraits. Full-length portraits often were painted to life size.

Implicit in the large format portraits was a new tendency for displaying such art. No longer was the portrait kept in a chest or on a shelf. Now the portrait was to be hung permanently, framed, on a wall. In this way, portraiture lost some of the intimacy with which it began in the 15th century in favor of a far more public presentation of an individual. And with the increasingly public nature of the portrait the greater the emphasis on establishing not only the likeness but also the social status of the sitter.

Venice became an important center for portraiture in the 16th century, possibly because it was there that the new technology of oil painting on canvas was perfected around 1500. Venetian artists like Titian and Lorenzo Lotto were thus among the first painters to exploit fully the combination of oil on canvas medium, elaborate settings, and large scale formats in their portrait commissions. They painted large, yet highly portable pictures, ideal for shipment to distant clients, intended to be hung on walls, and almost always made with the purpose of enhancing the social status of the sitter. Venetian portraits, consequently, were designed to be convincing rather than simply illusionistic, consistent with the Renaissance conception of magnificence. Precisely rendered details of a sitter's features were less important than the overall effect created by the portrait. For the elite patrons of the arts in Renaissance Italy, establishing one's elevated social status was not so much a choice but a social obligation. In order to create magnificence a client had to





Ills. #2.17 Titian, *Charles V, Seated*, 1548 oil on canvas, 203.5 x 122 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

make a 'suitable expenditure on a great scale.' Such expenditures not only reflected on the status of the individual making the commission, but on the city or state to which he belonged. Yet, paradoxically, magnificence should be tempered by virtuousness and restraint. One should spend a lot, but not too much, and one should know how to spend tastefully.

One commissioned the best artists because they cost the most. In exchange, the portrait painter's skill was measured by his ability to give his clients the image of how they wished to be seen by the world (devout, reserved, self-possessed, etc.). The more information provided in large-format portraits, like three-quarter and full-length portraits, set against elaborate backgrounds, the more likely the portrait to

assert the sitter's social standing. Rank and profession are often conveyed by the clothes the sitter wears or by the objects arrayed in the space with the sitter. Clothes played an even more important role in portraits of women, since they otherwise generally lacked public roles in society. Like many places in Europe, Venice had sumptuary laws, which were designed to prohibit overly extravagant displays of wealth via dress, jewelry, and the like. The state fixed the price that individuals were allowed to spend on their clothes and jewelry and tried to impose sober standards of morally appropriate wear. Black was a popular color for conveying sobriety, restraint, and even religious piety.

Titian's portrait of the most powerful political figure in Europe during the 16th century, the Emperor Charles V (ills. #2.17), exploits the technology of oil on canvas to create a painting roughly five feet by three and one half feet in dimension. Titian devotes less than half the

canvas' surface to Charles. And instead of depicting the Emperor with the standard attributes of power and rank, he presents the man in a simple, if rich black costume. Titian effectively conveys the sense of the Emperor as a reserved, somewhat introspective person. His magnificence is communicated through muted signals, like the velvet and tasseled armchair, which is a surrogate for a throne, and the embroidered golden cloth hanging behind Charles, symbolic of the Emperor's status. To the right of Charles is the base of a classical column, implying classical virtue, learning, and order, and beyond, an idealized landscape, standing in for Charles' earthly dominions. The Emperor is such an important man he doesn't need Titian to puff him up. Titian manages to present Charles with the qualities of inward nobility rather than through the outward display of the trappings of power.

## **Portrait types**

During the 16th and 17th centuries, portraiture was most often associated with enhancing the prestige of the sitter, and this remains a major element of portraits to this day. However, whereas portraits, especially of the large format variety, had long been only commissioned by the very rich and powerful, the rising mercantile class increasingly sought to commemorate themselves, often on nearly the same scale as portraits of the nobility. Merchant portraits, often with their families, were especially popular in 16th-century Antwerp, but the full flowering of middleclass portrait representations is most closely associated with 17th-century Holland. It was only with the invention of photography around the middle of the 19th century that painted portraits of middleclass sitters waned in popularity. Photographs, being significant cheaper, meant that virtually anyone could have themselves so commemorated and it seems as if almost everyone did. Conversely, with photographic portraits so cheap and so common, the wealthy and the powerful turned once more to painted portraiture to recapture the prestige attached to portraits in 17th century, spawning a generation of great European and American portrait painters, artists like John Singer Sargent, Cecilia Beaux, Giovanni Boldini, Anders Zorn, and many others. This market revival in painted portraits did not last much longer than several generations. The arrival of modernism and its experimental styles of painting undermined the aesthetic vocabulary of the portrait artists and profoundly changed public tastes. Great portrait artists became as rare in the 20th century as they were common in the second half of the 19th century.



## Artists' self-portraits

As with the other genres, the larger the market for portraiture the more diverse its subjects became, the wider the purposes portraits served, and the greater variety of formats in which they were made. These subgenres have no particular order of importance, but we will start with artists' self-portraits, since they are a reflection of the rising status of the artist during the Renaissance. Over the last five hundred years artists turned to self-portraiture to assert their identity and, as with their clients, used self-portraiture often to enhance their own position in society. Also, as the prestige of artists grew, collectors began to ask for self-portraits from the artists they collected. Most notably, in Florence, the Medici princes began to systematically commission and collect self-portraits by famous artists. These self-portraits can be found in the Uffizi museum in Florence today.

A still life painter when composing a still life might need consider only what is pleasing to the eye and likely to sell. But a portrait painter must almost always listen to the client. She must satisfy not only the sitter's expectations of a likeness, she must also make the sitter look good. Portrait painting therefore can be not only technically difficult, but the artist's creative intentions must also often give way to the sitter's vanity and social ambitions. Paradoxically, a number of European art theorists in the 17th and 18th centuries dismissed portraiture as a less significant genre compared to others like history painting, claiming that portraiture was too devoted to mere imitation (getting the likeness of the sitter) and too subordinated to the client for the artist to achieve significant personal expression, to fully express his artistic ambitions.

Self-portraits, by contrast, allow artists much more free rein to explore the craft of portraiture. It is one reason why many self-portraits depict the artist in the act of making art. One of the most intriguing features of images of painters at work is that the painter herself can only see what we see by looking in a mirror. So all self-portraits, until the invention of photography, are concerned at some level with mirror reversal. The artist must choose either to paint what one sees in the mirror, which is distorted not only by reversal but also by the optical diminishing of the relative size of the image based on the distance of the body from it. Or the artist can choose to paint what she remembers. With the mirrored image, the artist also has to account for her painting hand, which can never be seen stilled in the act of painting. So important is the mirror-reversal effect that many right-handed artists have actually painted themselves as if they were left-handed. Most

artists choose self-consciously to reverse the painting hand, to paint what they know to be true (right-handedness) rather than what they see in the mirror. Artists have similarly contrived many different solutions to the constant movement of their painting hand, some by disguising the hand by having it hold something other than a brush, or by hiding the hand altogether.



Ills. #2.18 Albrecht Dürer, *Self-portrait at age 28 with fur coat*, 1500, oil on wood, 67 x 49 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

The German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer was among the first artists to produce a significant body of self-portraits. In this self-portrait (ills. #2.18), painted at the age of 28, the right-handed Dürer paints his left hand, lightly enclosed on the fur-lining of his cloak, while hiding his actual painting hand below the edge of the portrait. Dürer's portrait is remarkable in other ways, including its aggressive frontality—few artists have painted themselves so centered in the canvas and facing the viewer so directly, head up, looking directly forward. Scholars have recalled and have quarreled over the significance of the resemblance of this self-portrait to representations of Christ that were popular at this time, such as this painting by Hans Memling of *Christ*



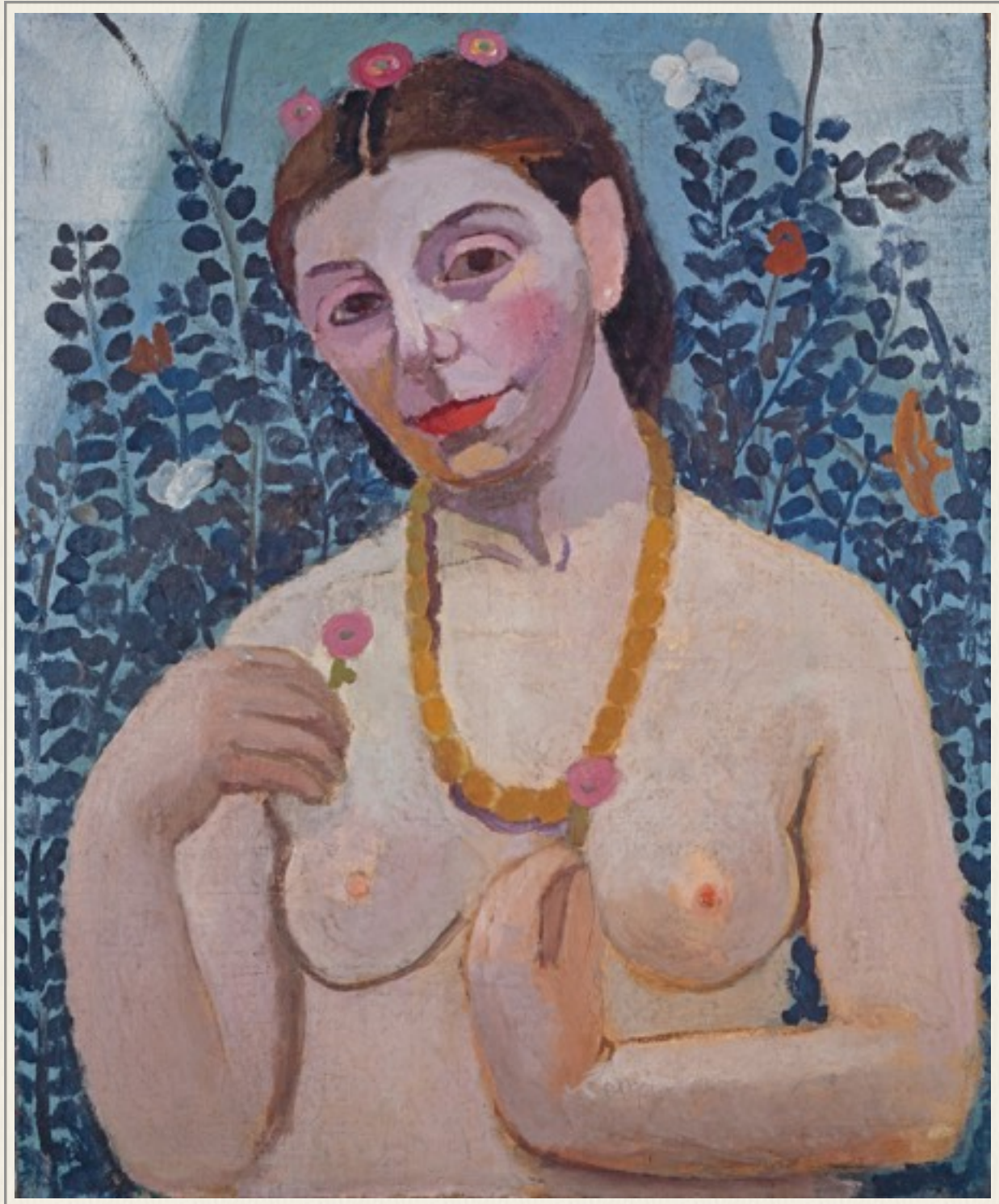


Ills. #2.19 Hans Memling, *Christ Blessing*, 1481, oil on panel, 35.1 x 25.1 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*Blessing* (ills. #2.19). Perhaps this is an image of self-identification, not that Dürer wanted to thought of as being Christ-like, but that in painting himself in this way he may have wanted to assert his religious faith, the idea of man being made in the image of his Savior. Self-portraits like these are always interesting because they are so exceptional, so outside the pictorial standards for artist's self-images.

Some artists have also used self-portraiture to explore the nature of identity, the question of who we are beneath not only our masks but also our faces. One of the most sustained efforts at self-exploration belongs to the Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn, who painted and printed self-images throughout his life. Collectively, Rembrandt's self-portraits have the quality of an autobiography, as through them one can trace the young exploring artist who grew into a successful, self-confident professional and eventually became a wise, but world-weary old man. Another remarkable set of autobiographical self-portraits was painted by a German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker at the beginning of the 20th century. At a time when women were beginning to demand social and political equality, Modersohn-Becker used her self-portraits as a means to explore what it meant to be a woman and an artist in a male-dominated society. On a number of occasions she painted herself naked before the mirror, perhaps intending by displaying her body in this way that she was expressing her

true self, without the trappings of dress and other social and moral proprieties that restrained the behavior and limited life's possibilities for conventional middle-class women in early 20th-century Germany.



Ills. #2.20 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Half-Nude Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace, II*, Summer 1906, oil on canvas, 61.1 x 50 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel

### Equestrian portraits

The idea of a man mounted on horseback as an image of power and authority stems from the ancient Romans, whose knightly class was signified by horse ownership. Italian Renaissance artists were directly inspired by surviving examples of mounted horsemen from ancient Roman sculpture. Not surprisingly, equestrian portraiture was a favorite choice for military leaders as well as for monarchs and other rulers who wished to



convey their political and military power. Equestrian portraits have frequently been sculptures, but beginning in the 15th century artists began to paint equestrian portraits of important political and military leaders; painted equestrian portraits remained popular until well into the 19th century. In the 17th century, we have the first examples of women mounted on horseback for their portraits, and such images served a common purpose as those of their male counterparts. Equestrian portraits are all almost by their very nature public images, intended to commemorate the individual and to impress the general public with their commanding presence.

### Marriage portraits

Many portraits of both men and women were made in order to accompany ambassadors to foreign courts when arranging political marriages. Such portraits often presented idealized and invariably flattering images of the prospective bride or groom, no doubt to the frequent disappointment of their marriage partner. Another common purpose for portraiture was to commemorate existing marriages. The client would commission either two independent portraits of the husband and wife, or a single picture with the couple shown together. When men and women are depicted together, the husband is almost always placed on the painting's left and the wife on the picture's right. This format preserves the hierarchy found in Christian images, where the most important figure, whether it is Christ, or the Virgin, or Adam, or whoever is the chief object of the image, is almost universally shown on the left. The first great marriage portrait commemorating ordinary (merchant-class) people, is the famed Arnolfini Double Portrait by Jan van Eyck in the National Gallery, London. The painting is remarkable for being the only known full-length double portrait of a couple painted in the 15th century; it is also unusually large for Flemish portraits from the period. And it is a technical tour-de-force in the careful resemblance to reality. For all its visual achievement, and unlike other van Eyck paintings, the painting produced no known imitations.

Far more common in the 15th- and 16th-centuries were head or bust-length views of the married couple, as one sees in this print by the German artist Israhel van Meckenem (ills. #2.21), representing himself and his wife. The most often represented sitters for such marriage portraits during the 16th century was the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther and his wife Katarina von Bora (ills. #2.22). The probable reason for the popularity of painted representations of this couple, most from the single workshop of the German artist, Lucas Cranach, was theological. Luther famously led a raid on a nunnery and among the liberated women was



Ills. #2.21 Israhel van Meckenem, *Double Portrait of van Meckenem and his wife Ida*, c. 1490, engraving. 13 x 17.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Ills. #2.22 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Double-Portrait of Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora*, 1529, oil on panel, 74 x 24 cm, approx. Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt

Katarina, who he subsequently married. Since Luther ostensibly began his religious career as a priest and Katarina as a nun, their subsequent marriage underlined the Protestant resistance to Catholic religious conventions, including the celibacy of its priest, nuns and monks. Adherents to the Protestant cause acquired images of Luther and his wife as one means of expressing their new religious convictions.

### Family groups

Portraits of husbands and wives were increasingly joined during the 16th century by images that included other family members, sometimes just the parents and their immediate children, but even larger family units (ills. #2.23). These family pictures seem to have been particularly attractive to the merchant class. Besides the natural feelings parents may have for their children, their progeny represent the future economic stability of the household and its prospects for maintaining its social position across multiple generations. In this anonymous portrait of the merchant Pierre de Moucheron and his extended family we can see these values at work. All the men occupy the left side of the painting, the women on the right (just as in the simple dual marriage portraits). The gesture of Pierre de Moucheron's older son suggests that the men are the providers of the abundant wealth signified by the food on the table, while the social aspirations and refinement of the women are indicated by the young woman playing the clavicord. At least three generations of the de Moucheron family are present.





Ills. #2.23 Anonymous (Flemish), *Pierre de Moucheron and Family*, 1562, oil on panel, 108 x 246 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The proliferation of such family portraits also reflects developing positive attitudes towards middle-class domesticity and the value of family life, as distinct from the public life enjoyed by the adult males within the family. In time the domestic values conveyed in paintings like these penetrated the group portraits of the ruling classes, so that even monarchs were eventually depicted in the company of their families as if they too were just ordinary people.

### Civic groups

Closely connected to the middle-class family portrait was the development of civic group portraits. Such images contrast greatly with portraits representing royal power. They emphasize the collectivity of the group depicted. In such images, most artists strove to represent each person with equal attention, which led to all kinds of compositional challenges for the artist to make everyone fit and to appear at least remotely lifelike. Civic group portraits reflect a collective, public identity. In the early 17th century in Holland, the most frequent group portraits were of the companies of guardsmen who participated in the wars of liberation that freed the Netherlands from Spanish rule. Later in the century military company portraits gave way to group portraits of professionals, as in Rembrandt's famous *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, 1632 and *The Syndics (Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers)*, 1662 (ills. #2.23). Rembrandt excelled at treating these group occasions as if they were scenes from ordinary life, rather than carefully staged portraits. The members of the Amsterdam cloth guild seem to look up from their business as if we, the viewer, had just entered the room. One figure half rises from his seat as he turns to engage the viewer. Rembrandt adds to





Ills. #2.24 Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Syndics (Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers)*, 1662, oil on canvas, 192 x 279 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

this effect by placing the viewer's position below the syndics. One can readily imagine the painting hanging in the guild hall on a wall slightly above eye level, which places the seated men at the same eye level as the prospective viewer of the painting.

### Psychological portraits

With the exception perhaps of some self-portraits, few artists attempted to approach portraiture as a means to explore the personality of the sitter, as opposed to their public face. We might call such portraits psychological, in that the artist is not interested, or at least not wholly interested, in representing the social position of the sitter, but is rather engaged in attempting to explore who the sitter is through the visual treatment of the sitter's face. It is somewhat arbitrary to isolate psychological portraits from all other portraits because most portraits attempt to convey some personality traits of the sitter through a variety of expressions and postures. However, it is much harder for even the most talented portrait artist to convey the sense of interiority, an inward-looking quality, which helps create an illusion of subjectivity for the sitter, rather than simply to show their personal attributes. In painting the face it is always difficult for the portrait artist to create the impression of the person behind the public mask.



One of the most famous images of subjectivity in Western art is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, painted sometime around 1505 (ills. #2.24). Much of the sense of interiority conveyed by the *Mona Lisa* Leonardo achieved through his remarkably subtle handling of the transitions from light to dark, particularly around the model's mouth. Viewed from our perspective, the right side of *Mona Lisa*'s mouth seems upturned in a smile while the left side does not. This almost imperceptible transition in her features creates an ambiguity of expression that gives her smile its mystery and the sense of an interior self that is animating her smile.



Ills. #2.25 Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1513-16, oil on panel, 77 x 53 cm,  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

These qualities in Leonardo's picture become more apparent if we compare his painting to earlier portraits, like this one by the 15th-century Flemish artist, Rogier van der Weyden. In Rogier's picture, the transitions from light to dark are more sharply defined than Leonardo's, so there is much less ambiguity regarding the model's expression. Instead of possessing *Mona Lisa*'s animated face, Rogier's model is by comparison quite stiff, almost wooden, her expression frozen. Rogier van der Weyden



has painted an extraordinarily precise and beautiful portrait of this woman, but we have little sense of the person behind the mask. Great psychological portrait artists tend to express personality through the kind of visual contradictions Leonardo used in the *Mona Lisa*.



Ills. #2.26 Rogier van der Weyden, *Portrait of a Woman in a Winged Bonnet*, c. 1440, Oil on panel, 47 x 32 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

### The portrait after photography

Photography changed forever the social functions of portraiture. Everyone could be the subject for a portrait. And in time, the makers of portraits became increasingly the same as portraits' consumers. The 'selfie' is undoubtedly the most dominant form of portraiture in our time. Photography presented new opportunities for the art of portraiture and new problems. Photographs indelibly preserve the 'face' of an individual. In this photograph of Abraham Lincoln (ills. #2.27), probably the first American president we might consider a media figure, we can observe in unforgiving detail the wayward strands of Lincoln's untamed hair and the man's creased forehead. The camera, in this case, does not flatter the man. We trust this photograph to be an accurate presentation of what Lincoln looked like. In this way, resemblance overwhelms the other aspects of portraiture (status, identity, possessions, etc.).





Ills. #2.27, Anonymous photographer, Abraham Lincoln, c. 1861-65, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Photographs possess the unrivaled ability to record the evolution of the face over time. While great portrait artists like Rembrandt, by painting themselves over time, depicted the aging of the artist, they could not rival the documentary power of the photograph to show the ravages of age. These are now invariably found in every family's photo album or digital photo collection. A highly focused investigation of this effect is found in the photographs by the American photographer Nicholas Nixon. Since the 1970s Nixon has annually

Ills. #2.28 Nicholas Nixon, *The Brown Sisters*, 1999, gelatin silver print, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

photographed his wife and her three sisters, always posed in the same order. Individually, the photographs have a kind of ethnological quality, capturing the look of some American women in a particular year, conveyed by changes in fashions. But in sequence, the





subtle transformation of the faces of the four sisters. creates a powerful document of what it means to age. For most viewers, we know nothing about these women, about their lives, their occupations, their trials and tribulations. We have just this uncanny record of faces, younger and older, year by year.

The tyranny of resemblance in the Lincoln photograph or those of the Brown sisters is no doubt one reason wealthy elites in Western society



#2.29 Thomas Gainsborough, *Ann Ford*, 1760, oil on canvas, 134.9 x 197.2 cm, Cincinnati Art Museum

turned during the second half of the nineteenth century to painted portraits. They wanted something costly, not cheap. They wanted someone to give them at least a family resemblance to the great portraits of 17th century Holland and Flanders or those of the English aristocracy painted in the late 18th-early 19th centuries. One of the artists whose paintings were in high demand among American art collectors in the late 19th



century, commanding prices that rivaled those for Rembrandt and Titian and other great old Master artists, was Thomas Gainsborough. Gainsborough was one of the most successful portrait artists in 18th-century aristocratic Britain. He excelled at full-length portraits painted to near life-size that stressed the elegance, cultural refinement, and beauty of his female sitters. In a painting like the portrait of Ann Ford (ills. #2.29), Gainsborough emphasizes Ford's social standing by the elegance of her dress with its elaborate lace work and her possession of cultural



Ills. #2.30 John Singer Sargent, Mrs. Joshua Montgomery Sears, 1899, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

attitudes characteristic of well-bred women belonging to the British aristocracy, here articulated with multiple references to music (the lute cradled in her arms, the bass in the shadows behind her, and the sheet music upon which she rests her elbow). She appears as if she were waiting

for someone to take up the bass for a duet, its presence suggestive of a male accompanist to this as yet unwed woman.

Late 19th-century elites commissioning contemporary artists for their portraits clearly had in mind such models as Gainsborough for how they wanted to be treated. One of the great society portraitists of this period was the American-born John Singer Sargent. In this characteristic portrait of the wife of the department store magnate Joshua Montgomery Sears (ills. #2.30), Sargent emulates some of the formula that made Gainsborough so successful. Although Mrs. Sears is not accompanied by cultural attributes like Ann Ford's musical instruments, her dress in its own way is as elegant in its satin sheen and gauzy overlay as Ford's. And



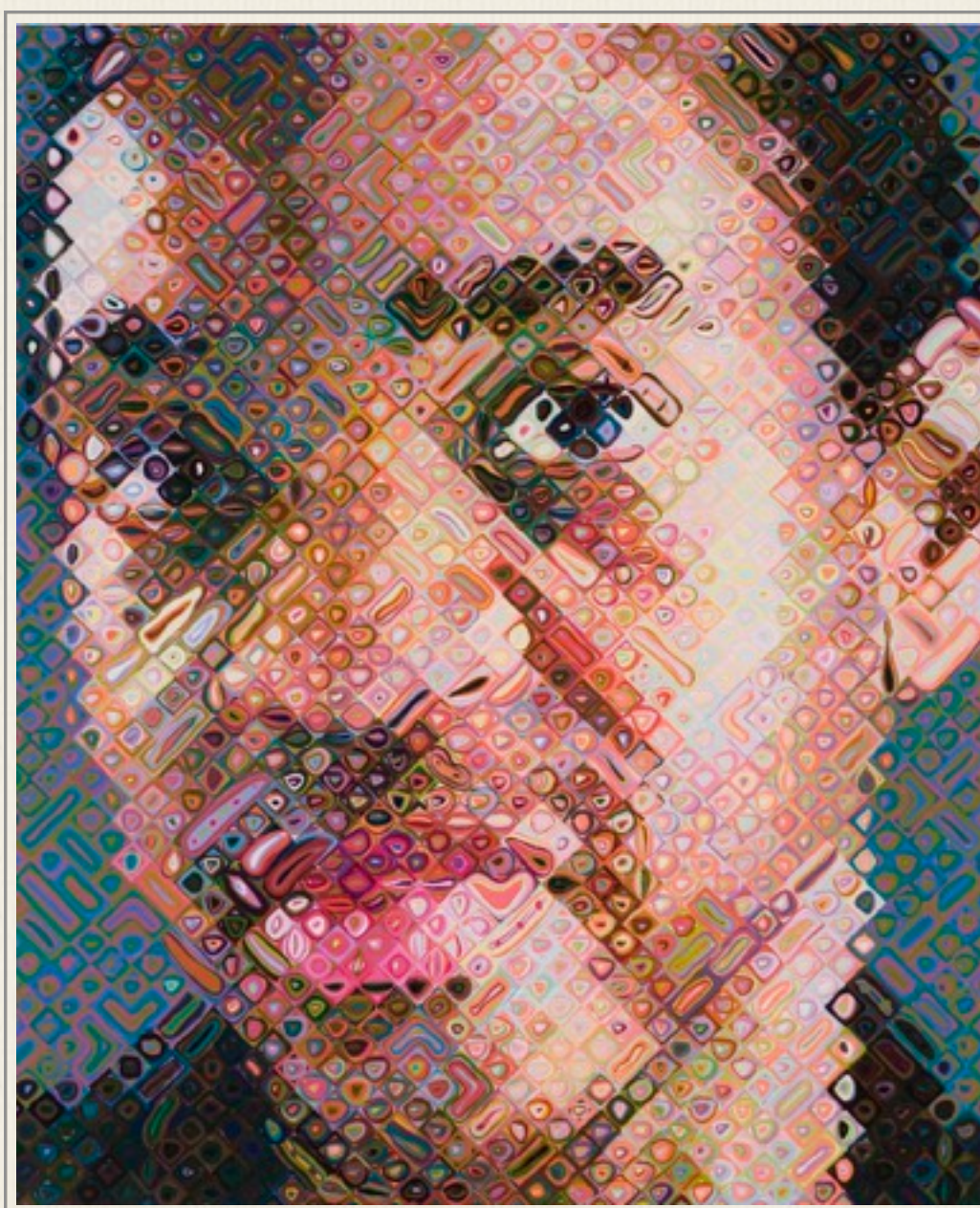
Sargent renders the dress with a remarkable bravura of brushwork, which suggests rather than describes the fabric, the folds, and the texture of surfaces. Viewed from up close, the fabric dissolves into broad strokes of paint. Mrs. Sears sits confidently in her chair, her face too, like Ford's, delicately stabilized by the touch of her hand. Sargent adds a touch of drama to his portrait by setting Mrs. Sears against a very dark background, against which the white of her dress stands in striking contrast. And we can be confident that both painters gave their respective clients what they wanted, and that both women emerge from their painted representations as more elegant and more beautiful than they were in life.

Ills. #2.32 Alice Neel, *Frank O'Hara #2*, 1960, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 61 cm. private collection © Estate of Alice Neel

As with most of the other genres, 20th-century modernism exerted a negative impact on portraiture. Its general rejection of representational realism meant that after Sargent's generation, few major artists would make their careers and their fame through portraits. Painted and sculpted representations of people, of course, did not disappear altogether; there have been and continue to be artists whose careers essentially revolve around portraits. But in the age of photography what those portraits are becomes quite different than it had been in prior centuries. For example, the American painter Alice Neel was one of those rare artists to paint almost exclusively portraits, but in her work, Neel eschewed a photograph-



like effort to capture the 'faces' of her sitter, in this case the American poet Frank O'Hara (iis. #2.31) in favor of expressive treatments of her friends and models. Neel does not flatter O'Hara, but we know from photographs of the poet that she, with a nod to caricature, did enough to produce a 'likeness' of the poet. But far more than likeness, and certainly much more than O'Hara's career as a museum curator and poet, Neel's portrait is motivated by factors fundamentally different than those conditions that shaped Sargent or Gainsborough's portraits. Neel's portrait is essentially a private picture. How the painting is made is at least as important as who is being painted. Little though is given to context, to clothes, or social status. The sitter merely provides the opportunity rather than the reason for the painting.



Other painters have more directly engaged the impact of photography on portraiture. Chuck Close has been painting monumental portraits since the late 1960s. As high as eight feet tall, Close's portraits are blow-ups, usually of just the face, taken directly from photographs, painstakingly graphed onto the canvas. Originally, Close translated the photograph very closely into paint. But over the years (ills. #2.32), Close's portraits became visually increasingly complex. They preserve the overall photograph source material from his blown-up photograph, but

Ills. #2.32 Chuck Close, *Lyle*, 1999, oil on canvas, 259.2 × 213.7 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Inc., © Chuck Close, courtesy Pace Gallery



Close divides his portraits into small quadrants, each treated in a very painterly way. The only absolute requirement for each square is that the brushwork collectively preserves the local color of that area of the face, so the overall image will still be readable as a portrait. In Close's art, 20th-century abstraction (see chapter 8) meets photographic realism.

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## On mythological imagery

### Mythological imagery and Renaissance humanism

Mythological imagery in art, that is to say, subjects referencing the Greek and Roman gods, goddesses, and epic heroes, like Hercules and Theseus, came to prominence in Italy beginning in the second half of the 15th century. Of all the new genres that developed during this period of Western art, mythological imagery was most closely tied to the revival of interest in classical literature. Throughout the Middle Ages, Western scholars and theologians retained memories of the works by ancient authors, especially Roman writers, who could be read in the original Latin. (Knowledge of Greek was not widespread in Western Europe until after the middle of the 15th century). But because medieval scholars were almost always closely tied to the Christian faith, they preferred to study ancient texts concerned with philosophy and science, subjects that could be most readily absorbed into a Christian theological framework. One distinguishing feature of Renaissance culture was a pronounced shift by humanist scholars of interest from ancient works of science and philosophy to that of literature, poetry and history. The word 'humanism' is derived from what was in effect a Renaissance academic curriculum, the 'studia humanitatis', which meant the study of grammar, rhetoric, moral philosophy, poetry and history, mastered through the reading, interpretation, and emulation of Roman and (somewhat later in the Renaissance) Greek authors.

An important impetus behind this change and behind the rise of humanism in Italy generally was the role of the courts of Renaissance princes. 15th- and 16th-century Italian princes, as well as wealthy businessmen, and, sometimes, civic entities like artisan guilds, highly valued the opulent display of wealth as public confirmation of the social and/or political prestige of the prince, or burgher, or corporate entity. To convey the proper magnificence a prince, a rich man, or a guild might pay to erect a church or decorate a chapel or commission a costly painting. Princes could also convey magnificence by subsidizing the careers of writers and scholars, who would be attached to their courts, along with other typical retainers like artists, musicians, jesters, and dwarfs.

In this Renaissance humanist environment, where knowledge was a matter for public display, the appreciation for classical mythology became a common measure of the degree of one's education and intellectual sophistica-

tion of all who belonged to humanists courts or comparable environments where humanist skills were highly valued.

During the early Renaissance mythological subjects were thus often presented as forms of erudite, sometimes even arcane knowledge. This is why humanist scholars, philosophers, poets, and artists frequently presented for courtly appreciation didactic (moralizing, educational) subjects in philosophy, poetry and art couched in the guise of classical mythology. And because interest in mythological subjects, like other aspects of the revival of antiquity, occurred within the context of a profoundly Christian society, humanist scholars and the princely courts that sponsored them held Greco-Roman myths to be secondary in significance to the Christian meanings that might be derived from them. In the visual arts, it was often the case that outwardly attractive representations of the ancient gods and goddesses disguised the inner and more important Christian messages, which could only be full grasped by the properly initiated. In some humanist circles it was assumed that these mysteries would lose their magical powers if revealed to the everyday world.

Among Renaissance artists a favorite source for mythological subject matter was the Roman writer Ovid (43 BCE – 17 CE), in particular, his *Metamorphoses*, a narrative poem describing the creation and early history of the world according to Greco-Roman mythology. Ovid was the principal source, although not the exclusive source, for many of the most popular subjects in 16th- and 17th-century art: such as the stories concerning Jupiter and Europa, Perseus and Andromeda, Jason and Medea, Orpheus and Eurydice, Diana and Callisto, Hades and Proserpina, Daedalus and Icarus, and Pygmalion. Although the poem was known throughout the Middle Ages and Ovid is referenced in medieval art, only in the Renaissance did the *Metamorphoses* become a significant source for visual artists. One reason is that until the early 16th century, there were few vernacular translations of Ovid, and those available only in difficult-to-obtain manuscripts. Most artists, trained as craftsmen and rarely as scholars, were typically unable to read the Latin manuscripts of Ovid's text. With the invention of the printing press, the *Metamorphoses* became one of the most frequently published books. The first printed Latin version dates from at least as early as 1479. The first English translation of Ovid was published by William Caxton in 1480. And Caxton translated his text not from the original Latin but rather from a printed French translation. This speaks to the enormous popularity of Ovid's text, which was further confirmed by the numerous printed editions in vernacular translations published all over Europe throughout the 16th century.



15th-century Renaissance humanist scholars and artists in their circles approached Ovid's stories as metaphors. The *Metamorphoses* primarily had to do with the loves of the gods, and the transformation of themselves or their human lovers into various animals and plants. So in the early Renaissance these stories were read as metaphorical parallels to Christian love and to the transformation of the soul through the love of God. Of course, at various times, Christian theologians also attacked Ovid's work for its obvious paganism and for the rampant immoral behavior of Ovid's human and divine characters.



Ills. #3.1 Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, c. 1485, tempera and oil on panel, 69.2 x 173.4 cm  
The National Gallery, London

The *Metamorphoses*, of course, was not the only source of Greco-Roman mythology upon which artists could draw. Ovid, himself was also read for his *Fasti*, a poem in the form of a calendar of months that told numerous stories about ancient Rome and its gods. Among other popular sources were Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, although interestingly these texts were only translated into most vernacular languages much later than the *Metamorphoses*. (The first Italian edition of Homer was not published until 1544.) It is in the *Odyssey* that Homer tells the story of Venus (Aphrodite) and Mars (Ares) being surprised by Venus' husband Vulcan (Hephaestus) and trapping them with an invisible net that he used to drag the unfaithful couple to Mount Olympus to shame them before the other gods. This story is only hinted at in Sandro Botticelli's painting, *Venus and Mars* (ills. #3.1), where Vulcan does not appear. Instead, the painting dwells on the opposition between love (Venus) and war (Mars). It is believed that the painting, because of its unusual horizontal format, may have once decorated a large wedding chest, called a *cassone* or another, similar piece of bedroom furniture. If attached to a wedding

chest, the imagery may have had a moralizing message, a caution against the excesses of love.

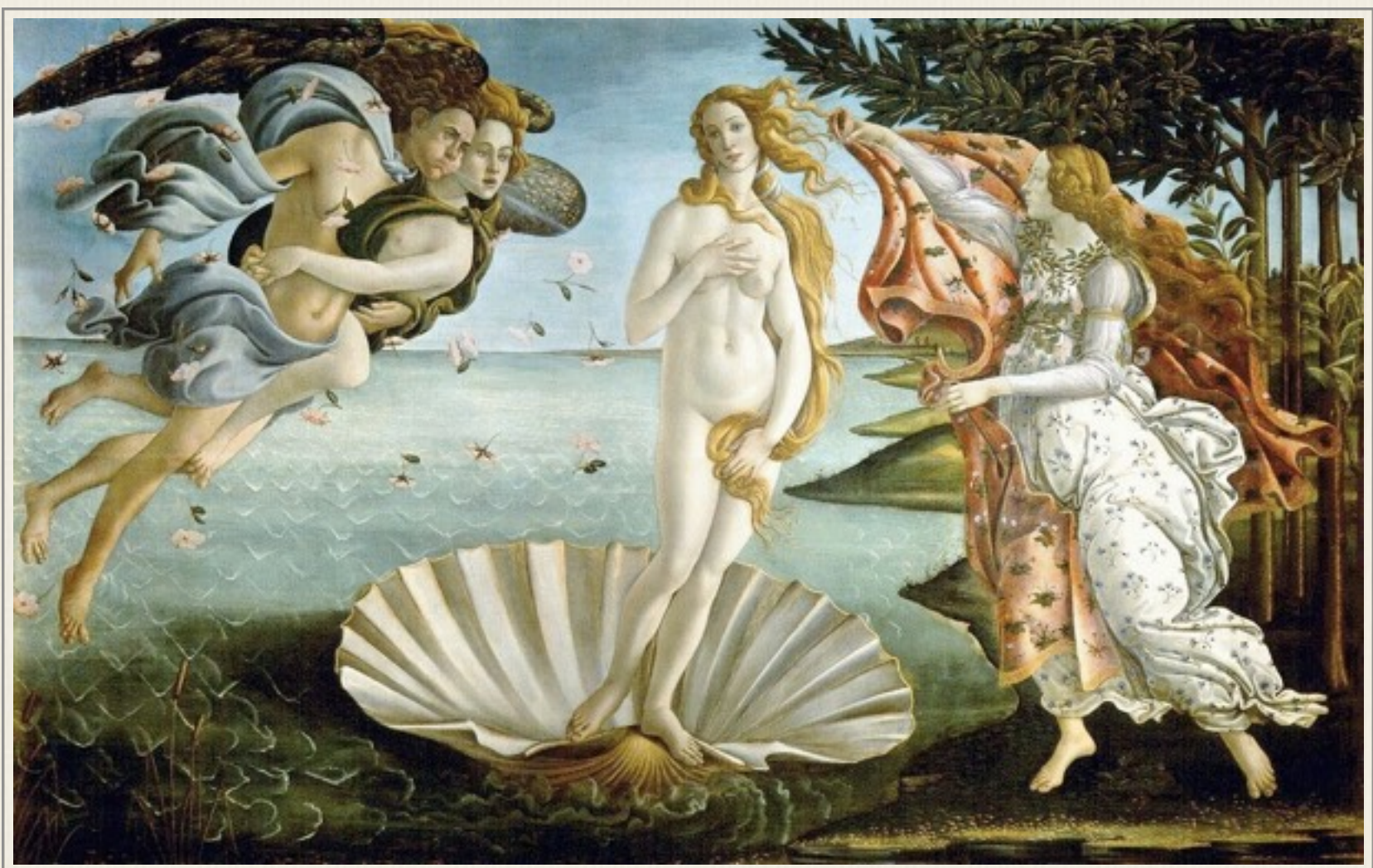
Venus and Mars is good example of the sort of scholarly erudition that could be expected from 15th-century mythological art. Since Botticelli often worked for the most powerful merchant family in 15th-century Florence, the Medici, when selecting the theme of Venus and Mars Botticelli may have been inspired by the work of Marsilio Ficino, philosopher and tutor to the Medici. Botticelli was possibly familiar with Ficino's *Commentary on the Symposium: De Amore* (by Plato), in which Ficino gave Mars and Venus the following attributes: "Mars stands foremost in strength for he makes men stronger. Yet Venus masters him ... in conjunction with him, in opposition to him... often restrains his malignance... Wherefore she seems to tame and placate Mars. But Mars never masters Venus." If Botticelli's painting was indeed inspired by Ficino's text, one possible interpretation of this picture is that love is greater than war. We see how Botticelli depicts Mars fallen into a languorous sleep, while little putti (naked boys or cherubs or cupids) strip him of his arms. In contrast to the sleeping Mars, Venus is alert, watchful and self-possessed. If the reference is to Homer's tale, then Venus and Mars might be taken to symbolize the importance of fidelity in marriage. We also know that the painting was modeled in parts after a lost ancient painting described by the Roman poet Lucian, portraying Alexander the Great's wedding to his wife Roxanna. Given the multiple possible sources and meanings attached to Venus and Mars and other early Renaissance mythological images, such pictures might best be regarded as visual puzzles that could only be fully decoded by the erudite and/or the initiated. They may even have been designed to be purposively ambiguous in their symbolism, intended to inspire philosophical discussions among the philosophers, courtiers and princes gathered at court, or in the case of Botticelli's painting, at the Florentine palace belonging to the Medici.

The most famous pair of mythological subjects painted in 15th-century Italy are also by Botticelli: *Primavera* (ills. #3.2) and the *Birth of Venus* (ills. #3.3). For 15th-century secular paintings these are unusually large pictures (the *Primavera* is over six by ten feet and the *Birth of Venus* over five by nine feet); it is therefore uncertain where they were first located or what their purpose was. Standing at the center of *Primavera* is Venus, while above her is Cupid. On the left are the Three Graces and far left, Mercury, guardian of the garden of love presided over by Venus. Next to Venus on the right is Flora, goddess of spring. On the far right is Zephyr, a god of the winds, who is pursuing the nymph Chloris. There are multiple interpretations for why these particular





Ills. #3.2 and #3.3 Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*,tempera on panel, 203 x 314 cm and *The Birth of Venus*,  
tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.5 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence





figures are grouped together. The painting's intended meaning continues to be a subject of art historical conjecture. Perhaps the most likely explanation of *Primavera* is that the painting was inspired by Ovid's *Fasti*. In the May section of the poem, Flora recounts how she was once the nymph Chloris ("as she talks her lips breathe spring roses"), but that she had been raped by Zephyr, who, regretting his deed, transformed her into Flora and gave her as a gift a beautiful garden of eternal spring.

Ovid may also have inspired *The Birth of Venus*. Venus is depicted full-grown at birth, borne from the sea on a half shell, powered by the breath of the Zephyrs (left). One of the goddesses of the seasons is about to cover her with a flowered cloak. As a celebration of the goddess of love, the Christian humanists who were the first audiences for this picture might have understood the painting as an allegory of divine love.

#### Mythological imagery and the idealization of the human body

Artists working on mythological subjects, unlike landscape and still life painters, had ancient prototypes at hand from which to draw inspiration. Yet the number of ancient motifs used by 16th and 17th century artists in their interpretations of the classical stories were surprisingly few. Among them were the *Venus Pudica* (see ill. #3.4) and the Three Graces (see ill. #3.5) motifs. One sees the *Venus Pudica* type, for example, in the *Birth of Venus*. The name comes from the Latin word "pudendus", which meant both external genitalia and shame. The modest act of hiding one's genitalia, of course, also draws the viewer's attention to it. Artists constantly exploited this aspect of the type for its ambiguous combination of modesty and erotic display.



Ills. #3.4 Roman copy after Greek original by Praxiteles, *Capitoline Venus Borghese*, 2nd c. CE, marble, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Ills. #3.5 Anonymous Roman copy after Greek original, *Three Graces*, 3rd c. CE, marble, Musée du Louvre, Paris



The Three Graces motif probably first developed from the example of a 3rd century CE Roman sculpture unearthed during the 15th century and subsequently put on display in the Piccolomini Library in Siena cathedral. Other versions, such as this one, were subsequently excavated in Rome and other sites. Botticelli cited this type in the *Primavera* and artists continued to quote this type in both painted and sculpted form for the next 300 years.

More important than modern European artists quoting specific works of ancient sculpture, however, was the example ancient sculpture set for the idealization of the human body. We are so accustomed to such idealized representations that it is difficult to remember that it is an important choice for an artist to make, to show the human body in a patently unrealistic manner. Why would artists do this? Why would their patrons want such images?

Early in the Italian Renaissance artists achieved the ability to make convincing representations of the body. But rather than pursuing an art of ever-heightened realism and lifelikeness (which was already achieved by Flemish artists like Jan van Eyck), they began to strive to represent the human body as a perfect form. While surviving examples of ancient sculpture helped inspire this pursuit, Renaissance artists were more powerfully influenced by those texts that had survived from antiquity that described the Greek pursuit of the ideal body in art. 15th-century artists were familiar with the biographies and achievements of many ancient painters and sculptors through surviving classical texts (only a few copies of these ancient artists' works survived in sculpture and none in painting). They could read in the Roman writer Cicero's book on rhetoric the story of the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, who lived in the 4th century BCE, and is said to have taken the five most beautiful women he could find and used the best features from each in order to paint his version of Helen of Troy.

Renaissance artists also knew of, though no text survived, of the ancient sculptor Polykleitos' *Canon*, an artistic treatise in which Polykleitos described his discovery of the ideal form of the human body, based on mathematical proportions, and given life by means of *contrapposto*. Polykleitos divided the body with theoretical horizontal and vertical rods (down the center and through the middle of the body), creating four quadrants. On one side of the body the figure would have a straight, weight-bearing leg and a relaxed, bent arm. On the other side, the figure would have a relaxed, bent leg and a straight, tension-bearing arm. The hips and head of the figure would face in one direction, while

the figure's chest would face another. In this way Polykleitos, and all the ancient sculptors who followed after him, could convey the effect of the body at rest and yet poised for action.

The Venus type from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* adapted Polykleitos' formula for *contrapposto* to his own exaggeration of the body's features. Botticelli probably had no particular classical sculpture as a source of inspiration for his Venus; his idealization of her body does not directly follow the conventions of Greek sculpture (such as those found in the Capitoline Venus). To idealize his figure Botticelli exaggerates Venus' proportions by elongating her arms, legs, fingers and toes, and by emphasizing generally the linear patterns created by the contours of her body, by her hair, which flows in ribbons behind and over her body, and by the linear depiction of her face. However, as Renaissance artists paid ever more close attention to surviving examples of ancient sculpture (and as more ancient sculptures were unearthed in Rome and elsewhere), Botticelli's form of idealization gave way within a generation to one closer to antique models, most powerfully embodied in the work of another great Florentine artist, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Ills. #3.6 Michaelangelo Buonarroti, *Bacchus*, 1497  
marble, 203 cm high, Museo Nazionale del Bargallo,  
Florence

In an early, but for him relatively rare, depiction of a mythological subject Michelangelo sculpted the figure of Bacchus, the ancient God of wine. The sculpture is much closer than Botticelli's *Venus* to the classical prototype above, although Michelangelo reveals his independence from classical precedence and his confidence as a sculptor by using the *contrapposto* not simply as a device to make his figure more lifelike, to create the classical impression of potential motion, but also to emphasize the drunkenness of Bacchus, whose backward tilting torso, especially when seen from the side, suggests a figure hardly capable of standing on his own two feet.



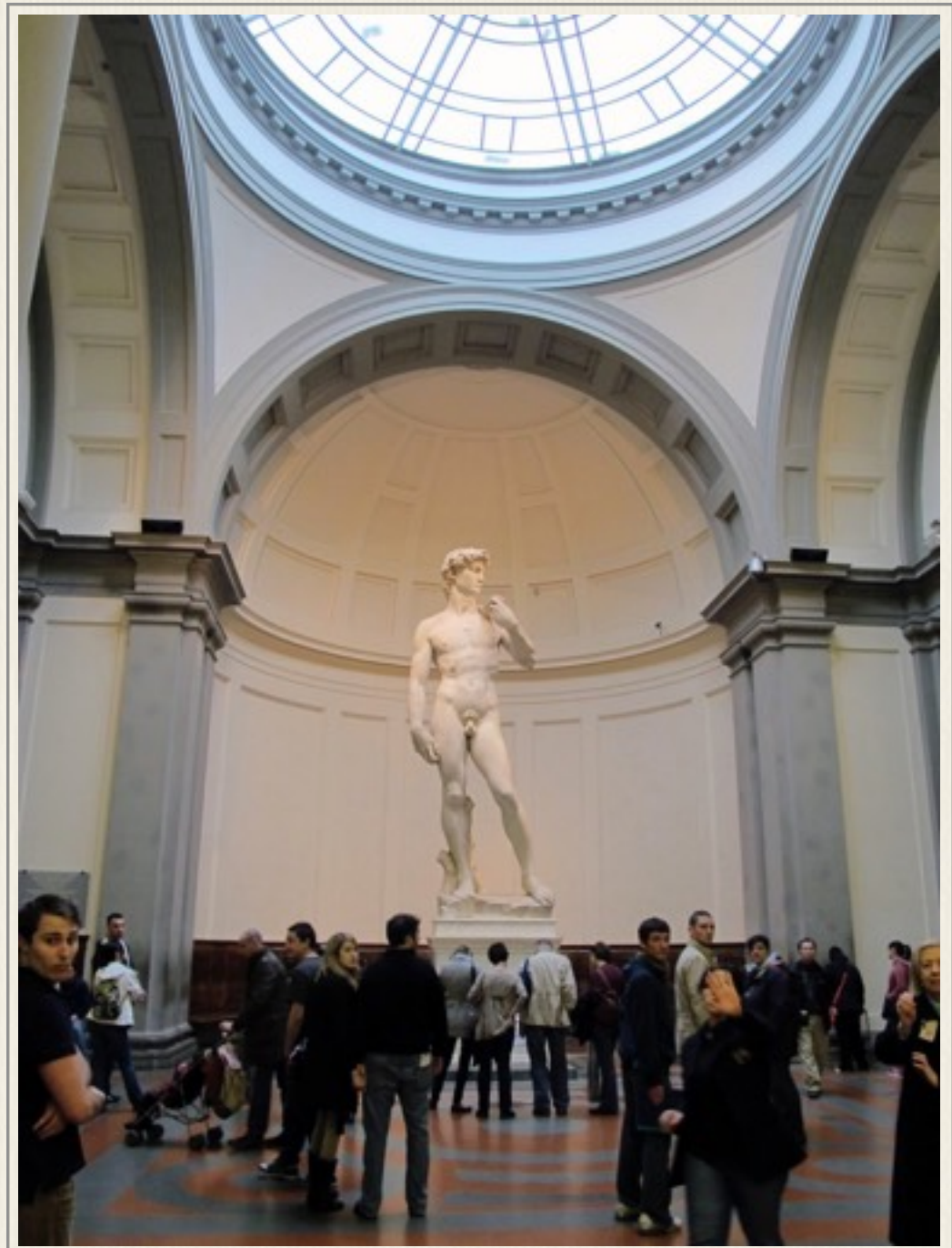


One of the more remarkable things about Michelangelo was his willingness to translate the classical bodies of mythological art into the production of religious paintings and sculptures. Michelangelo was unrivaled in treating the bodies of his Old and New Testament figures as if they were Greek gods. So while such famous works as the David (ills. #3.7), originally sculpted for Florence Cathedral, and the ceiling decorations for the Sistine chapel in the Vatican in Rome do not illustrate Greco-Roman mythology, they employ figure types modeled on classical examples. In these and other works Michelangelo was perceived by his contemporaries to have surpassed the achievements of ancient artists. Few artists after Michelangelo would be as daring in portraying heroic nudes in the context of religious subjects. But Michelangelo's handling of the human body, with his figures' aggressive physicality and monumentality, the powerful way they twist and turn in space, would inspire artists making mythological works for the next two centuries or more.

Ills. #3.7 Michelangelo  
 Buonarroti, *David*, 1504, marble,  
 434 cm high Galleria  
 dell'Accademia, Florence

The influence exerted by ancient sculptural prototypes on 16th and 17th-century sculptors is not surprising. But it is a little surprising that painters and printmakers only rarely bor-

rowed directly from a classical sculpture to illustrate a classical myth. Sometimes they revised a classical source, as in the image of the 'Three Graces', but mostly they developed their own inventions when illustrating mythological subjects. This freedom was expressed both in their approach



to their compositions and to their subject matter. Unlike 15th-century artists, who were expected to couch their classical narratives inside a symbolic system that could refer to Christian principles and ideas, later artists emphasized the erotic and/or violent features of these stories often at the expense of their potential symbolic meanings.

#### Secularization of classical mythology

Secular (non-religious) subjects represented a small percentage of all art produced in Europe for most of the 15th century. There is still much we do not know about the early history of secular imagery in the Renaissance, but scholars believe that most secular paintings were first intended as domestic decorations. As was probably the case with Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* and perhaps even with the *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus* mythological pictures were often attached to furniture, like chairs and storage chests. A favorite place for secular subjects was the *cassone*, a large wedding chest commissioned as part of the marriage contract between wealthy families, usually in pairs (one for the groom, one for the bride's trousseau). *Cassone* decorations could be quite elaborate, reflecting the political and economic significance attached to these familial alliances. Mythological paintings were also set permanently in wall panels to decorate interiors where such imagery was viewed as especially appropriate. In the first half of the 15th century it became fashionable to decorate the study of the humanist prince, known as a *studiolo*, with portraits of famous men. Later in the century, mythological imagery often replaced portraits as *studiolo* decor. One of the most famous *studiolo* of the Italian Renaissance belonged to the great collector Isabella d'Este—the same woman whose portrait by Titian I discussed in the previous chapter and the wife of the Duke of Mantua. It featured mythological paintings by her court artist Andrea Mantegna and other artists (the entire suite, without the paneling, is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris). The cycle, which was begun at the very end of the 15th century, adhered to the moral and metaphorical uses to which humanists put mythological imagery; Isabella's pictures were united by the common theme of the virtues triumph over the vices.

The need to find Christian, moral justifications for mythological subjects, however, began to decline after 1500. In part this was because the production of works of art depicting Greco-Roman myths started to develop independently of humanist courts. The 16th-century liberation of mythological imagery from Christian symbolism paralleled the evolution of the other genres. Artists began to depict mythological stories in order to exploit economic opportunities. Such subjects moved from small panel paintings attached to *cassone* chests to large oil paintings on canvas,



designed to hang on the walls of palaces. And mythological subjects appeared in numerous other places and media, such as majolica tableware, prints, and tapestries.



Ills. #3.8 Anonymous (Italian), The Adultery of Venus and Mars (after Giulio Romano), c. 1535-40, maiolica, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Maiolica is tin-glazed earthenware. Cheaper than gold and silver plates, among the Italian urban merchant class it became the tableware of choice. In the 16th century majolica ware was frequently decorated with narrative scenes, often copied from prints and paintings by famous artists (see ill. #3.8). One could both eat off these plates and display them as objects for aesthetic admiration. Prints, because they were relatively inexpensive to make and yet could be mass reproduced, became the place where the most innovations in the composition and treatment of mythological subjects occurred. And it was largely through prints that the visual culture of the Italian Renaissance was disseminated to the rest of the European world. Tapestries (see ill. #3.9), woven wall hangings, were the most expensive works of art made for domestic interiors from the end of the Middle Ages to the 19th century. They developed over time from simple abstract designs in a few colors to extremely elaborate narrative compositions created through the use of many colored threads. During the 17th and 18th centuries mythological subjects became especially popular with the artists who designed the tapestries (the actual weaving of the





Ills. #3.10, Giulio Bonasone, *Venus and Mars*, mid-16th century, engraving, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

tapestries was the work of many hands in large workshops).

What lay behind this great proliferation of Greco-Roman stories across all media in post-15th century Western art was the fact that artists now found it much easier to produce such themes without the requirement of a humanist education. Nor did it take great learning to understand their work. This is because of three factors: the printed publication of popular retellings of classical stories, the publication of illustrated vernacular translations of Ovid and other classical texts recounting stories from Greek and

Roman mythology, and the appearance of emblem books, which were illustrated texts providing symbolic representations of particular concepts, often using classical imagery. In addition to this general dispersion of knowledge about classical mythology there was the final, and perhaps most important factor of the attraction such images for collectors, an attraction that owed at least as much to the sensuality and visual pleasure they provided (see ills. #3.10) as for any moral meaning that could be attached to them. As with the other genres, the increased demand for secular, mythological art caused a corresponding increase in the variety of themes and formats used by artists. Without classical precedents, artists had the freedom to develop imaginative retellings of the classical myths that emphasized the sensuality of the scenes depicted.

Over the course of the 16th century Venice became the primary producer of mythological imagery. It was then the center of European book publishing and an international trade emporium. Venetian painters became some of the most sought after artists of the 16th century and Venetian art would exert a powerful influence over European painting for the next several centuries. Of all the great 16th-century Venetian artists, Titian was perhaps the most inventive and most influential, especially in his





Ills. #3.10 Willem de Pannemaker, *The Bridal Chamber of Herse*, c. 1550, tapestry,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

treatment of mythological subjects. Over the course of his long life, Titian worked for kings and Popes alike. Titian pioneered the large-scale portable easel picture targeted primarily for the pleasure rather than the edification of his patrons. An important example is his *Venus of Urbino* (see ill. #2.12), painted around 1537–38. The painting is remarkable among other things in that it sets its subject, Venus, in a contemporary Venetian interior. The goddess' maids, dressed in contemporary Venetian clothes, have opened a *cassone* and are either storing or removing from the chest Venus' dress. Unfortunately we know comparatively little about the circumstances of the painting's commission and its intended purpose. We know that the painting was commissioned by the Duke of Urbino and that it probably was displayed in the Duke's bedroom, but precisely where it was located (whether it was hung like a modern painting from a wall or attached to a piece of furniture) or what its intended meaning was are not known. It has been argued that the Venus was painted as a didactic image



for the Duke's young bride, but it is a curious subject with which to celebrate marriage other than as a presentation of erotic love. Perhaps the most convincing argument about this picture is that it was made for the Duke personally, that the sleeping dog, a symbol of marital fidelity, does not stir to protect its mistress precisely because the person viewing the painting, the Duke, was a familiar visitor.



Ills. #3.11 Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, c. 1556, oil on canvas, Wallace Collection, London

Titian painted many works comparable to the *Venus of Urbino*, large in size and mixing eroticism with classical mythology. Titian created for the most powerful ruler in 16th-century Europe, Philip II, king of Spain, Flanders, and large sections of Italy as well as most of the recently discovered New World, among other works, a cycle of six large canvases based on stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The first two paintings in the series were of Danae, a mortal to whom Jupiter makes love by taking the form of a shower of gold, and Adonis, a young man seduced by Venus. The next two pictures were *Perseus and Andromeda*, in which the Greek hero is shown rescuing the enchained Andromeda from a dragon, and *The Rape of Europa*, which recounts the abduction of a mortal woman by Jupiter who takes the form of a bull.



The final pair of pictures consisted of Diana and Acteon and Diana and Callisto. In the first painting, the mortal Acteon spies on Diana, goddess of the moon and of the hunt, while she is bathing with her maids. In the second picture, Diana discovers that Jupiter has made her maid, Callisto, pregnant. A number of years later Titian painted for Philip II the conclusion of the Diana and Acteon story, in which the vengeful Diana pursues Acteon, transforming him into a stag, whereupon he is eventually run down and killed by his own dogs.

Despite being the political leader of Catholic Christian Europe, and the most important force behind the Papacy's effort to reassert the Catholic faith over Europe in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, Philip II clearly admired Titian's paintings for their visual beauty and obvious erotic content, and not for any disguised religious symbolism. In fact it would be difficult to extract any moral message from a painting like *Perseus and Andromeda*. Philip, however, did not have to justify owning such pictures, since no one but those close to him would have seen them. One must remember that until modern times, pictures like these, as opposed to religious art, belonged to private (royal, aristocratic, and merchant) collectors and were rarely seen publicly. It was not until the end of the 18th century that royal collections of art began to be opened for the general public as museums, and the erotic charge of these images was at least somewhat tempered by the simple passage of time and by the fame of the artists who made them.

#### Mythological imagery and realist trends in Western art

From the 16th century to the 19th century the appreciation for mythological subjects in art combined the seemingly paradoxical values of learning (familiarity with classical Greek and Roman literature and culture), eroticism (a great many such images had explicit or nearly explicit sexual references), and power (the taste for and display of mythological works of art was the province of the European nobility). It is probably for all these reasons that mythological images are relatively rare among the art produced in 17th-century Holland. As a society dominated by merchants and largely subscribing to a variety of Protestant faiths, the Dutch could easily view works like Titian's mythological pictures as immoral and to associate them, moreover, with the courts of Spain, France, and England, all political and economic rivals of the Netherlands.

Rembrandt was one of the few Dutch artists to create ambitious treatments of mythological scenes. Unlike Titian, and most other artists who painted the loves of the ancient Gods, Rembrandt did not idealize the model he painted. In one of Rembrandt's paintings of Flora (ills. #3.12),

Ills. #3.12 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Flora*, c. 1654, oil on canvas, 100 x 91.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

the goddess of spring, she looks very much like a contemporary Dutch woman dressed up to appear like a goddess. And in fact Rembrandt may have used for the model of Flora his common-law wife Hendrickje Stoffels. Besides Flora's double chin and prominent nose, there is something oddly too real about the arrangement of



leaves and flowers precariously balanced on her indeterminately shaped cap. And rather than a benign joy or sensuality as one finds in Botticelli's *Flora* from the *Primavera*, Rembrandt's model is surprisingly downcast and introspective for the role she plays.

Mythological imagery would always be more difficult to sustain when artists chose, like Rembrandt, not to idealize the bodies they represented. For example, at the beginning of the 17th century, the Italian artist Michelangelo Merisi (called Caravaggio) introduced into his portrayal of both religious and mythological scenes a startling new realism. Caravaggio took as models for his pictures peasants from the streets of Rome and he painted them in such a way that they appear not fully transformed into the characters for whom they posed. The street urchin, for example, persists in Caravaggio's depiction of the 'victory of love': *Amor as Victor*, 1602 (ills. #3.13). The conception of Cupid not as a baby but as a prepubescent boy goes back to the early 16th century with such pictures as Parmigianino's *Cupid Carving a Bow*, 1524 [Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). But Caravaggio's *Cupid* is depicted with such realism that one can confidently place the boy's age somewhere between ten and thirteen and instead of the generalized features of a god,





Ills. #3.13 Caravaggio, *Amor as Victor* (*Amor Vincit Omnia*), 1602, oil on canvas, 156 x 113 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

the boy's face has the quality of a portrait, and in expression as someone deeply familiar to the artist. Caravaggio's picture possesses a more or less explicit homoeroticism, a suggestion underlined by well-known facts concerning the artist's scandalous homosexual affairs, some of which have tied the artist to well-known church figures in Rome.

It was always difficult to draw positive moral lessons from mythological paintings, but in realist paintings like Caravaggio's this difficulty is heightened. Perhaps this is one reason

why during the 18th and 19th centuries artists seeking elevated and moral subjects turned toward historical subjects, even though such representations often continued to be derived from historical events taken from the histories of ancient Greece and Rome. Those historical interests, however, also spilled over into such mythological images that continued to be produced. New to the 18th century was the effort by painters, seen especially in the work of the French artist Jacques-Louis David, to integrate classical motifs and stylistic characteristics derived from the study of antique prototypes with popular classical mythological and historical subject matter. This style is popularly known today as neo-classicism. Also new to these 18th - and early 19th-century mythological subjects is the desire to represent the scenes depicted with some measure of archeological accuracy. Such works followed in the wake of the first professional excavations of ancient sites, most notably of the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, buried in a mountain of ash and lava during an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the first century CE. These





Ills. #3.14 Jacques-Louis David, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1817, oil on canvas, 184,1 x 241.6 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

excavations provided the first modern glimpses of Roman wall painting. Other scholarly efforts made 18th-century artists more interested in attempting to recreate ancient interiors as they might have once appeared, rather than offering modern or generic, idealized contexts for the stories being depicted, as pre-18th-century artists had done. What develops in pictures like David's *Cupid and Psyche* (ills. #3.14) is a struggle between the tradition of idealized representations of the human body (this is especially true of Psyche and less so of Cupid in this picture) and the simultaneous ambition to create a historical setting as realistically concrete, as accurate a reproduction of an ancient interior as an artist working during this period could imagine it.

### The naked and the nude

Possibly because the study of ancient Greek and Roman history, philosophy, and literature remain staples of humanistic education right through the 19th century, images of Venuses, satyrs and nymphs continued



to be produced by artists even as late as the early 20th century. However, gradually the vitality and inventiveness of these images faded, to be replaced by an increasingly formulaic and academic brand of art. Academically-trained artists continued to paint such subjects because they believed that the artistic values of the classical tradition represented permanent, unchanging values, and that only by imitating Renaissance and antique formulae could modern artists hope to create important works of art. The French painter William Bouguereau is directly quoting the art of the Italian Renaissance, of Botticelli and Raphael, in his *The Birth of Venus* (ills. #3.15). But Bouguereau's Venus has given up all pretenses to modesty and any claim to morality. It is instead a celebration of an artistic tradition that allowed classical references to be used to cloak the art's erotic message in a mantle of erudition and morality.



Ills. #3.15 William Bouguereau, *The Birth of Venus*, 1879, oil on canvas, 300 x 218 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Bouguereau's painting is a reminder of an essential feature of the large majority of mythological images, which is the nudity of the characters depicted. We tend to use the word 'nude' interchangeably with the word 'naked', referring to the state of being without clothes. But in art, because of the long Western tradition of idealizing the human body, it is perhaps more useful to think of a 'nude' as more than a body without clothes. In early Renaissance works, like Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, the nakedness of the model was couched inside larger theological and moralizing narratives. Idealization lifted the body of whoever modeled for Botticelli's picture, if there was indeed a model, to the status of an ideal type; Venus is not a woman but an abstract reference to an ideal notion of female beauty. This ennobling strategy remains a staple of representations of the body in Western art from the 15th century to the mid-19th century. Indeed, subjects that were regarded as having a higher, nobler meaning (with the usual exception of religious scenes) conveyed those noble characteristics through the presence of the naked male and female forms to create the nude. However, as we have also seen, from the earliest years of mythological art, the representation even of the idealized female body clearly satisfied desires belonging to its almost exclusive male audience that lay outside any moral or educational purpose for such images. Nude women in art are there to be acted upon, rarely are they the actors. Male nudes conversely are actors, and often perform heroic feats.

We might consider the naked in art arising when the nude body gets too close to reality. A 'nude' can be imagined as being eternally without clothes, but a 'naked' person in art is someone who conspicuously and at a particularly moment lacks clothes. We see this in Caravaggio's nude Cupid, whose realism defeats the ennobling idealization of the body to emphasize the erotic character of the boy. To be naked is to be conscious of the absence of clothes (often the artist attempts to convey the sense of shame) and it is a consciousness that may be shared by the figure portrayed and by the person viewing the image. The 'nude' typically deflects such consciousness. The nude body is simply there, taken as an unexamined fact of the image.

Until the 19th century nudity was a common characteristic of both male and female figures in art. But early in the century the male body for a variety of complex social reasons, so long as the female body was sufficiently idealized, the naked remained the nude. But after the invention of photography the conventions of the idealized body became increasingly difficult for artists to sustain. Bouguereau was enormously successful at selling his mythological nudes. However, even in his own day such idealized treatments of antique subjects appeared out of touch



with the modern world, with its large cities, factories, and new modes of transportation, like the railroads. Inevitably artists began to challenge the legacy of the classical tradition. We see this especially in the work of the mid-19th-century French artist Edouard Manet, who effectively redid Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (see ill. #2.12) by putting her in a modern



Ills. #3.16 Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130 x 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

context. When he exhibited this painting, entitled *Olympia* in 1865 (ills. #3.15) at the annual official art exhibition, the Paris Salon, it caused a scandal. Many thought the picture to be pornographic, something they would not have said of Titian's picture. Contemporary critics perceived the woman, a professional model who posed for a number of Manet's other pictures, to be a prostitute, which is to say, the critics saw her as naked. Similarly, we know from press accounts that Manet's treatment of the shading of her hands and the sole of her foot were perceived, not as shadows, but as dirt, the kind of uncleanness popularly associated with prostitution. And contemporary critics were scandalized by the replacement of dog in the *Venus of Urbino* with a cat, its back arched ready, presumably to spit at the viewer, as perhaps a cat might react to a stranger—and in this way signifying infidelity. Manet's *Olympia* coolly gazes out at the viewer, and it is the viewer, and especially Manet's

contemporary viewers, who are made uncomfortable. In many ways, Manet brings up to date what Caravaggio had done at the beginning of the 16th century, that is to say, Manet refused to idealize his model and he made his subject both contemporary and real to his audience. When the goddess loses her attributes as the perfect embodiment of love and becomes a real woman, she is transformed from an artistic nude, representing high culture and an unchanging classical tradition, and becomes a naked, modern woman. With Manet the viability for Western artists of classical mythology, and especially of the mythological nude, effectively comes to a close.

Until the end of the 19th century, Latin was the universal language of Western universities and academies, and with it a broad knowledge of Greco-Roman culture was considered essential to a well-educated person. However, with the rise of modern science and the increasing importance of mathematics as the foundation of advanced knowledge in the sciences, Latin's prestige (and with it the prestige of the classical tradition) began to wane. Both scientific and humanistic scholarship were increasingly published in the native language of the author or in languages dominant in a particular region, like German in Central Europe or English in the Anglo-American world. The study of the ancient world, which for so long had been central to Western knowledge, faded into specialist disciplines. At the same time, the development of modernism in literature and the visual arts rejected much of the classical tradition for what was taken to be its academicism and over-dependence on the past. Consequently, in visual art of the last century and a half mythological imagery has become comparatively rare.

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## On landscape

### Nature and landscape

Landscape is one of the most enduringly popular genres in the history of the visual arts. In Western art, as in the art of some other cultures, landscape imagery has such a long tradition that we take the genre not only for granted, but as something natural. We tend to think of landscapes and landscape art (in the form of paintings, prints, drawings and photographs) as natural in the same way that their subjects are typically the natural world. But what a landscape is and how it should look is a product of many artistic conventions developed over many centuries. Though the scene depicted within a landscape may appear 'natural', the devices used to create it are not. Even the French Impressionists, who most radically attempted to paint just what they saw and not what they knew to be there, still used many venerable conventions for how to create a landscape image.

There have been essentially three basic types of landscapes commonly used in Western art since the end of the Middle Ages: those that serve as settings for human narratives, those that depict human environments (what are popularly called 'cityscapes'), and those in which nature is represented just for itself, that is to say, as a more or less autonomous image, in which human beings if present play only a minor role. The landscape typically has a symbolic or social purpose in the first two types, reinforcing the meaning of the human narratives that typically occupy the foreground of these images. In the third, autonomous type of landscape, symbolic meanings may also exist, but here the decorative purpose generally outweighs the symbolic intentions. Autonomous landscapes became popular during the later Renaissance when art collectors began to admire works of art as much for their aesthetic qualities as for their religious, social, or political meanings.

There is, of course, considerable overlapping between these three types of landscape. During the 16th century, for example, artists often inserted religious or Greco-Roman mythological narratives into their landscape scenes. In such cases, human figures were often rendered small in scale compared to the landscape depicted, barely intruding upon the pleasures offered by the natural vista, yet providing a religious or moral justification for the image. In 17th-century Italy and France landscapes



with classical architecture, often populated with small figures in 'classical' or 'Biblical' costume, were popular subjects (as in ill. #4.1).

The changes that developed in landscape art over time have reflected changing attitudes toward the natural world in Western culture. In a sense, nature itself is a social construction. Societies immediately dependent on the natural world for survival often have little to say about their experience of it. In non-literate societies nature might be regarded as a direct and undifferentiated extension of the human world, which modern viewers tend to romanticize as being 'at one with nature'. Conversely, nature as landscape seems to be a particular manifestation of urban societies, for whom the natural environment is at least at some remove; urban dwellers may not raise the food they eat or gather the fuel to cook their food and heat their homes. They may live in relatively confined spaces with less than ample light. The natural world then becomes an expression of the opposite of the conditions of urban existence. In this sense, nature could become something less lived in than something to be looked at.

Because Western culture has been dominated by Judeo-Christian thought, until recently nature was largely viewed in the West as useless if it were not somehow humanized. In this tradition God gave man dominion over nature. The concept of wilderness, for example, did not acquire positive connotations until very modern times. Nature was not something to be preserved, but something to be subjugated, as the natural right of humanity.

During the 18th century a new way of viewing nature came to prominence in Western culture. Nature came to be seen not only as the physical cosmos but also as an active agent that governed moral and other forms of human behavior. 18th-century philosophers wrote, for example, of the natural rights of man. A concept of God initially lay behind this notion of nature, yet nature was often evoked to describe what the world ought to be like rather than what humanity currently found it to be. Finally, in an increasingly secular society, and in conjunction with the developing natural sciences, 18th-century scientists, poets, painters, and philosophers began to conceive of nature as being without human obligations. We might subject nature to our control but it was not made for us. Humanity's place in the cosmos became infinitely smaller than it had been during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This is reflected in the portrayals of 18th and 19th century landscape artists who frequently treated nature as something to be admired but also feared as being outside

human control. 18th-century philosophers assigned an aesthetic category to this experience, what they called the 'sublime.'

Gradually consciousness of our fragility and cosmic insignificance gave rise to the modern notion of wilderness as a place independent of human intervention, some measure of which ought to be preserved. Modern landscape art often adopted this preservationist mentality. Most recently, instead of continuing our blind dominance of nature, we have come increasingly to believe that we must learn how to live with and to sustain the natural world. Similarly, artists have tried to make artworks that interact with nature, rather than merely portray it. The emerging philosophical view of nature is that it should no longer be conceived as an object acted upon by human agents, but rather as an agent in its own right, shaping human behavior even as humans attempt to shape nature. The growing understanding of the fragility of the natural world through the consequence of global warming just makes us that much more acutely aware of nature's agency in shaping how we live today and how we will live in the future.

#### The view and the vista

Westerners have a way of thinking about nature as if it were a 'view', waiting to be captured in its entirety by an artist with paint on canvas or a photographer with her camera. Yet the landscape view is culturally contingent. Some human cultures represent the natural world only symbolically. In others, nature is visualized through isolated individual elements, such as a branch of a tree or a flower. Even in modern Western culture a landscape image, simply because it is a three-dimensional illusion created on a two-dimensional surface, is always composed of a set of conventions; some conventions are stylistic, others are thematic. These conventions frame the way artists and their audiences imagine the world. In other words, the depiction of a natural environment is not naturally a 'view' or a conglomerate of 'views'; the human experience of the world consists of myriad points of contact. We might attend at one moment to the smallest, most focused perception, an ant crawling across the pavement, and at the next instant, to the largest, most unfocused bodily response to an environment, as when we tell a companion, 'it's a beautiful day'. It is no one thing we are experiencing, but a very complex set of experiences, which have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension.

So, when we say that nature as a view is what constitutes landscape imagery in the post-medieval Western tradition, what we mean is that the most dominant way Western culture creates images of the natural or man-made environment or of a natural world that has been human ordered is as



if they were views through a window. Imagine the 'window' frame to consist of the edges of the image, and that everything that is visible from our interior space to this outside world constitutes a landscape. This is one reason why during the 15th and 16th centuries, and sometimes much later, artists represented interiors in which a landscape could be seen through a window. These depicted 'windows' often seem to occupy two different roles at once, as windows, extending the space of the represented interior further into depth, but also as landscape images in their own right, as if not a window at all but a painted representation fixed to a wall, as part of the room decor. Often these depicted landscapes in a window frame are so articulated that they could compete as landscapes with any independently conceived landscape image.



detail of ill. #1.12

Look, for example, at this detail from the early 15th-century painting, the Merode Altarpiece, attributed to the Flemish artist Robert Campin (ill. #1.12). The altarpiece's primary subject is the Annunciation, seen in the central panel of the triptych, which Campin sets his scene in a

pointedly 15th-century Flemish interior, as realistically rendered as the artist could contrive. Conceived in this way, Campin made the Christian message tangible and brought it into the world of his contemporaries. Imagine an artist today representing the Virgin Mary kneeling in a suburban living room and greeting an angel, and one may understand something of the visual immediacy such images had for 15th-century audiences. Here, as in the work of many other 15th-century Flemish artists, the interior space flows out into a larger landscape, glimpsed in this detail from the right panel, a view from out of Joseph's workshop. We are positioned high up, looking down from the open window into the streets of a town, with many people strolling about. The window frame crops the cityscape left and right; here, as in so many 15th-century Flemish pictures, there is a pervading sense of a much larger world beyond what's visible in the window, if we were but able to draw closer to the window or to change our angle of view.

The window approach to the representation of landscape frequently led Western artists to create a dichotomy between the outside world, viewed through the window, and an interior view. Sometimes the contrast has theological meaning, as in Campin's painting, which tries to show us how the sacred world is coextensive with our own, how our everyday world lies just outside the holy environment inside. Sometimes the contrast has gender implications. 17th-century Dutch artists, for example, frequently depicted women alone in interiors, their contact with the outside world symbolically restricted to a view through a window. The window view also can articulate the difference between the real world in which we live and depicted representations of it.

As landscape imagery became more common and more sophisticated, artists' interest in depicting landscapes as views through windows gradually subsided. Yet landscapes continued to act as windows by imaginatively punching virtual holes into the walls upon which the landscape paintings were hung. More importantly, Westerners grew accustomed to seeing the natural world as if it were a painted scene. The French artist Claude Lorrain was one of the most influential landscape painters of the 17th century. His pictures continued to exert a profound influence over landscape painting until well into the 19th century. A painting like *Landscape with Nymph and Satyr Dancing* (ills. #4.1) contains many of the Claudian formula that proved so influential. In the foreground of his pictures he typically placed small figures of gods and goddesses or shepherds and their sheep, usually placed in relation to an architectural structure, in this case a classical ruin. Often there is a distant view of a bridge over water, and then, beyond the middle-ground, a distant view lost in atmospheric perspective—often using *contre-jour*, a





Ills. #4.1 Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Nymph and Satyr Dancing*, 1641 oil on canvas, 99.7 133 cm, Toledo Museum of Art

French term meaning 'against daylight,' where the sun is typically placed low on the landscape's horizon.

So powerful was the Claudian formula that not only did it continue to influence landscape painters, it became the primary model for English landscape gardens during the 18th century. English gardeners such as Henry Hoare fashioned their gardens, like Hoare's at Stourhead (ills. #4.2), as a series of landscape vistas, replicating the kind of views found in Lorrain's painting, complete with such things as 'Roman temples' or 'follies' as such decorative structures came to be known in landscape gardens—functionless pagodas that served to provide a visual accent to the garden, as well as one of many specific points from which the garden could be viewed. The very idea of a 'vista' is essentially drawn from landscape painting: a view through a long avenue or passage or houses and trees to a distant scene. Hoare and other ambitious landscape gardeners of the period carefully designed their gardens to contain a series of vista





Ills. #4.2 Henry Hoare, Park at Stourhead, Wiltshire, 1743-65

points, each giving a kind of 'painted' or ideal view that would show the gardens to their best advantage.

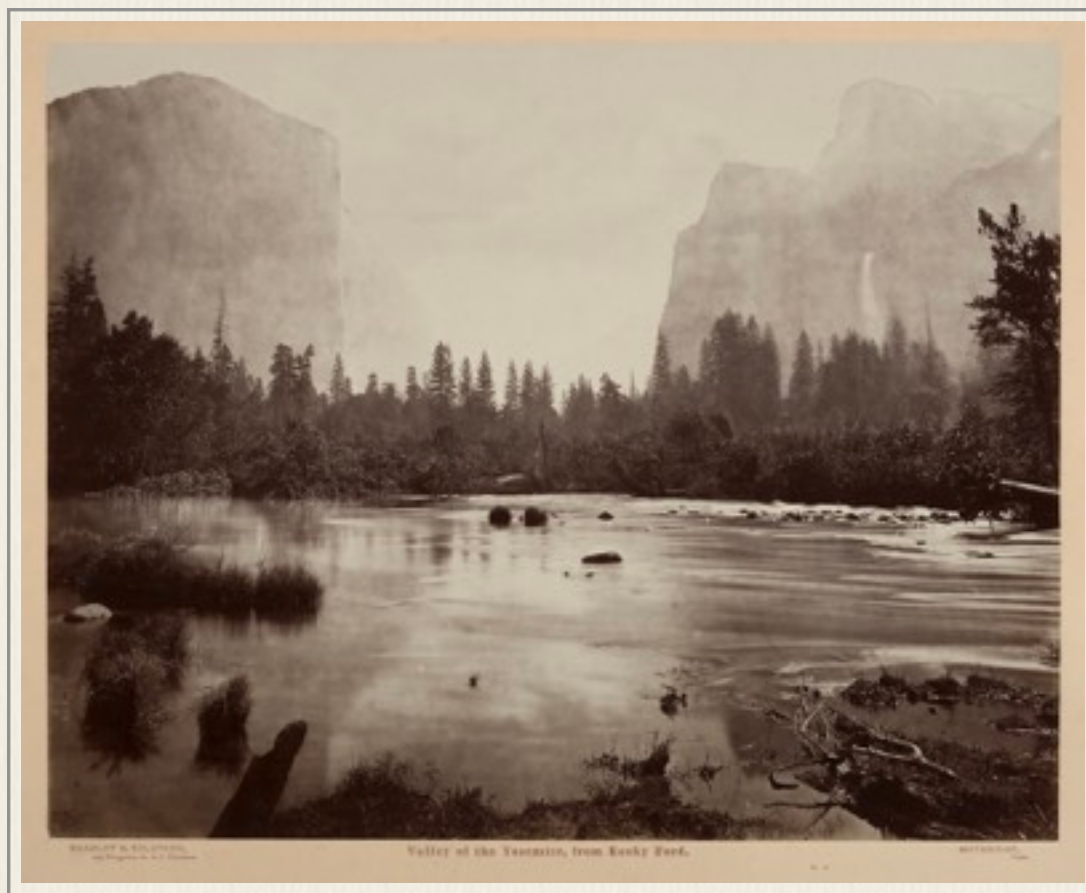
That notion of vista persists today in the way we are often led to view the natural world. For example, visitors to national parks are often guided to special 'lookout' points that feature the natural landscape framed for our viewing pleasure: by having us look, for example, up a river valley toward a distant waterfall or rock formation or similar natural attractions. In the American West some of these vista points were established for tourists by early non-native visitors to what are now famous national parks. Albert Bierstadt made a career of painting the spectacular geography of the American West. It is interesting then to compare his view of *Bridal Veil Falls* (ills. #4.3), made on a visit to California between 1871 and 1873 with a photograph that was widely reproduced by the English photographer Eadweard Muybridge (who spent most of his professional career in California), which is essentially the same view of *Bridal Veil Falls* (ills. #4.4), but taken for a vantage a little farther away than Bierstadt's view. In essence the painter and the photographer convey an identical message about the geography of Yosemite Valley, the same sense of the imposing scale of the sheer granite outcrops





Ills. #4.3 Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite Valley, California*, c. 1871–73,  
oil on paper mounted on canvas 66 x 48.3 cm Cincinnati Art Museum

of Half Dome on the left and Bridal Veil Falls on the right. From the time these two artists first visited what had yet to become a national park until today, literally millions of tourists have taken photographs of



Ills. #4.4 Eadweard J. Muybridge, *Valley of the Yosemite, from Rocky Ford*, 1872, albumen silver print,  
42.9 x 54.5 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

virtually the same vista. Indeed, often when we take photographs of places we visit as tourists, without being conscious of what we're doing, we will choose a vantage point simply because it already looks like a 'picture' and we might measure the quality or success of our own recording of a place by standards laid down by earlier landscape imagery.

### The grammar of landscape painting

Artists developed most of the most influential conventions for landscape paintings by the end of the 16th century. At the most basic level they used these conventions to convey a sense of great depth on a two-dimensional surface. Two additional important concerns for the landscape artist are how to create an orderly visual progression into the represented scene, and how to make such scenes sufficiently varied to arouse and sustain viewer interest.

One of the first conventions 15th-century Flemish artists discovered to convey great depth was "atmospheric perspective," the bluing of the sky in the distance. This convention replicates the natural effect the atmosphere has on the appearance of objects when seen at a distance. What happens is that as objects, as they increase in distance from the spectator become less sharply defined; they lose contrast with adjacent objects. At the same time, with increasing distance any color will appear less saturated and gradually the color will appear to combine with the color of the background sky, which is typically blue, and hence the bluing effect. Artists also experimented painting landscape scenes with setting or rising suns, in which the sky is red, and in this case 'atmospheric perspective,' instead of becoming blue, tends toward red.

Another early discovered convention is called the 'bird's eye view', which Campin used in the Merode Altarpiece. When we stand on level ground, objects in the foreground of our vision obscure objects behind. Consequently, landscape artists early on resorted to an elevated viewpoint, so that the viewer visually enters into their landscapes from above. Then, in order to make the rest of the depicted scene as visible as possible, artists would also use a high horizon, so that the depicted world rises up before the viewer into the extreme distance. The 'bird's eye view' combined with a high horizon enabled artists to encompass large areas of the world within a landscape. While it is possible to imagine artists drawing and painting a scene from life, from an elevated position like a high tower or ridge, the 'bird's eye view' normally should be regarded as an abstract vantage point (rather akin to a God's eye view, one that sees everything). A 'bird's eye view' thus is a conceptual assemblage of what the artist knows or wants to be known about the



landscape she represents, rather than a depiction of it as it is to be seen from a particular vantage point.



Ills. #4.5 Pieter Bruegel the Elder (or workshop), *The Fall of Icarus*, c. 1555-58, oil on panel, 73.5 x 112 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Many works by the great 16th-century Antwerp landscape and peasant painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder illustrate the conceptual aspects of landscape art. Bruegel took principals for organizing landscape like aerial perspective and a bird's eye view, already known to artists like Campin, and significantly extended their potential. One of his most admired pictures is *The Fall of Icarus* (ills. #4.5), which ostensibly illustrates a story from Greek mythology about Daedalus, the great inventor, and his son Icarus (the primary account for this story is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). Imprisoned by King Minos of Crete, Daedalus fashions wings of feathers and wax so that he and his son might escape. Icarus flies too close to the sun, melting the wax on his wings, and plummeting into the sea. In Bruegel's painting we see only Icarus' legs splashing into the water in front of the ship on the lower right of his picture. Daedalus too is only a tiny figure in the sky, his wings faintly silhouetted against the mountains that rise up behind the distant city. While Ovid's tale from Greek mythology might have provided a justification



for Bruegel's painting, the star of this show is clearly the panoramic landscape setting and not the actors.

Bruegel places our viewing entry point high above the foreground scene, so that we look down upon the plowman tilling his field, oblivious to Icarus' plight unfolding beyond. From there our view abruptly descends to a shepherd tending his sheep, and then, via another rapid descent, to the water itself. In other words, the artist guides our perception into the landscape, and to make these transitions from foreground to middle ground to deep recession he relies on overlapping planes, each featuring a different visual incident (plowman, then shepherd, then the sea) with little or no transition between each plane. Upon reaching the sea, the viewer's attention pivots upward as the landscape develops toward a high horizon. And, as the landscape rises, our view broadens, from one small corner of the world inhabited by the plowman, to a panorama so vast that we see the curvature of the world framed by distant mountains and a setting sun.

In such pictures as these Bruegel is literally world making. What he is not doing is imitating what he sees. The viewer may forget this because Bruegel creates the illusion of natural vision by offering the viewer a clear report of everything visible both near and far, much as a modern photograph is capable of reproducing. But of course this is not the way the human eye actually sees the world. Our eyes cannot view things far away with such clarity and in such complete totality, especially if required simultaneously to take in view objects close at hand. To take in any view our eyes register many small perceptions, some sharply perceived, others less so, which our brains then assemble into a totality. But any totality our minds make are never so all encompassing, so lucidly clear as the scene Bruegel offers us. In fact, Bruegel's picture, and this is often true of landscapes made in northern Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries, offers a combined micro- and macrocosmic view of the world. Metaphorically, we begin in the foreground in a small corner of the world, inhabited by a humble farmer plowing his field, but as our gaze travels back into the scene, the world opens out into a vast macrocosm. Because Bruegel treats things that are even very far away with remarkable attention to detail, despite some atmospheric perspective, our attention constantly shifts between the small detail, precisely observed all over his landscape, and the grand sweep of his vista.

What is reflected here in Bruegel's picture is the developing convention or habit that presumes that a landscape art should represent, as accurately and in as much detail as possible, everything that is in a scene, no matter how extensive the view. In this long-lasting landscape



tradition, the artist should represent the objects of nature's known shapes, known colors, and known textures, no matter how far away (with only small concessions made to atmospheric perspective), no matter how many other things are rendered with similar attention. For three centuries landscape became an art of what we know objects to be like in the world, rather than a record of how we actually see them.

Landscape painters before the 19th century rarely give the beholder an undirected view into a great distance, but rather they contrive the landscape so that one's attention moves back and forth across the scene and into depth. As in Bruegel's picture, typically that movement starts with the foreground left, from which the viewer's attention is then directed into the right middle ground, unfolding finally into the distant background toward the left side of the composition. Bruegel uses this formula, as Claude Lorrain later did (see. Ills. #4.1). Of course, our eyes are drawn to many other aspects of a landscape and need not follow the order that Bruegel (or Lorrain) lays down, but that order gives structure and coherence to Bruegel's representation and underlies all our visual experience with his picture.



Ills. #4.6 Jacob van Ruisdael, *Landscape with Waterfall*, c. 1668, oil on canvas, 142.5 x 196 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

When artists propose to imagine landscapes from a point of view coextensive with normal eye level, the first problem typically is what to do with the immediate foreground, that often unnoticed strip between the bottom edge of the image and its first important visual elements. Once an interesting entry into the pictorial space is achieved, the problem then is how to create an interesting and deep spatial recession without the benefit of a high horizon. In this painting by the 17th-century Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael (ills. #4.6), the artist introduces the viewer to his scene with a roiling waterfall and stream, viewed at a slight diagonal to the picture plane. The viewer is imaginatively called upon to ford Ruisdael's stream, which separates our world from the painting's world. Looking across the turbulent water our attention is called perhaps first to the rocks and leaning aspen tree on the right side of Ruisdael's picture. Light, filtering through the clouds above, highlights the water, rocks and fallen tree. Faced with a level viewing position artists often resort, as Ruisdael does here, to introducing rising ground into their landscapes in order to maximize the visibility of the depicted scene. From the water the scene rises on the right side of the painting to the middle ground where a copse of trees, largely in shadow, stand on a hill. On the left side of the painting, but lower down and further in the distance is another stand of trees. Between the two woods, like curtains on a stage pulled back, a distant view of a town skyline with its church tower, bathed in sunlight, opens below dramatically lit clouds. Alternating between brightly lit scenery and areas of landscape in shadow not only helps create the illusion of three-dimensional recession, it helps to make the scene more interesting to look at.

Another popular convention worth mentioning here is what sometimes is called a coulisse. Derived from the French and originally used to describe the flat pieces of scenery used to frame and close off the wings of a theater stage, a coulisse in landscape imagery is typically a stand of tall trees (buildings and mountains can also serve this function), to the right or left or sometimes both sides of the composition. A coulisse brackets the landscape view and directs the viewer's attention back toward the composition's center and the space of the scene.

Until the 16th century, landscape generally served as a backdrop to the important subject in the foreground of an image or the landscape as a vista, inhabited by small figures, viewed from a considerable distance. Italian Renaissance artists usually arranged their figures along one or two foreground planes, parallel to the painting's surface, and then added a landscape or cityscape setting to the background. Raphael's *Deposition* (ills. #4.7) demonstrates this. The artist created elaborate preparatory studies for the painting, carefully arranging the figures in parallel





Ills. #4.7 Raphael, *Deposition*, oil on panel, 179 x 174 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome

planes, in the sequence of three vignettes, the two figures holding Christ, the three figures behind this group (John, Joseph, and Mary Magdalene) on the left, and the group of four on the right (the Virgin Mary and others). Raphael did indicate in a preliminary sketch for the painting that there would be an landscape background, but the actual details of the landscape setting the artist only added to his picture after the figure groupings had been completely planned out. We can therefore think of the composition of the *Deposition* as consisting entirely its rhythmic arrangement of the figures and not the interaction of the figures with their environment.

Integrating figures into landscape settings was primarily the achievement of 16th-century artists working in Venice. Although we have only a handful of pictures by Giorgione, he was perhaps the most innovative Venetian painter of the 16th century. Giorgione was the first to exploit the full possibilities of oil painting on canvas, painting directly on canvas without preparatory studies, using the oil medium and



the flexible canvas surface (and flexible resins) to create soft, luminous forms. In the process he helped to forge a new kind of picture, the portable easel painting, admired for its decorative, aesthetic properties over any possible symbolic meaning. Venetians called this kind of painting *poesie*, by which they meant a picture that looks like painted poetry, by suggesting emotions and ideas without precisely depicting them. Giorgione's pictures also inaugurated a tradition later known as 'cabinet paintings'. These are small-scale art collectibles appropriate for domestic art collections.



Ills. #4.8 Giorgione, *The Three Philosophers*, c. 1508-09, oil on canvas, 123 x 144 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

In Giorgione's pictures, for perhaps the first time, landscape is not merely a setting for human narratives but an integrated part of the composition. Giorgione is also perhaps the first Western artist to paint figures in a landscape that effectively share the light and atmosphere of the landscapes they occupy. To integrate the figures into the landscape, Giorgione broke the planar construction of earlier Italian Renaissance



art. In *The Three Philosophers* (ills. #4.8) the men are arranged at a diagonal to the picture plane. At the same time, the artist depicts them in such a way that they significantly visually interact with their environment as part of the painting's composition. Instead of balancing the figure group on the right with another figure group on the left as earlier Italian artists would have done, Giorgione asymmetrically positions his figures in his composition, and for the first time achieves compositional balance by using a natural element—a mysterious shallow cave. Its large shadowy mass has equal visual weight with the smaller, but sunlit figures of the men (who also stand out from the dark foliage and trees behind them). Between these two large elements a distant, sunlit landscape opens up, and behind it a setting sun. What seems like subtle visual effects today must have appeared in the early 16th century as revolutionary. For the first time in Western art, human narratives unfold fully within an environment rather than merely in front of one and the notion of a painting's composition ceased to be confined merely to the arrangement of bodies in space, but now became an interaction between bodies and the space they occupy.

The integration of actor and environment Giorgione achieved for obvious reasons had a deeper and clearer impact on figurative artists than it did on landscape artists. As landscape developed into an independent genre over the course of the 16th century artists who specialized in the genre typically only painted the human figure in small scale, if they painted any figures at all. But Giorgione taught even the landscape artists how the environment not only could be compositionally significant in a picture, but how it could effectively become nearly as much an 'actor' in a scene as a depicted human being. Later, great landscape artists, like Rembrandt or the English romantic painter J.M.W. Turner, created narratives, or at least the appearance of drama, merely through their treatment of natural forms.

#### The varieties of landscape

As demand for landscapes increased, especially as decorations for one's home, the subjects and formats artists used became more diverse. Over time a few major subtypes within the genre developed. At one end of the spectrum of landscape imagery is the topographic landscape, which occurs when an artist attempts to map as accurately as possible a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. At the other end of the spectrum are fantasy landscapes or landscapes of the imagination. Such works essentially are conceived out of the imagination of the artist; while they might refer to flora, fauna, and geological formations found in nature, they primarily constitute a mental picture formed by the artist



rather than something even remotely observable in nature. In between are the other major categories: pastoral, ideal (or heroic) landscapes, picturesque and sublime landscapes, and Impressionist and Post-Impressionist landscapes (the latter leading toward abstract or non-objective art).

### Topographic landscapes

This sub-genre in landscape is closely related to maps and map making. The difference between a topographic landscape and a map grew sharper over time, but during the 16th and 17th centuries maps often looked like landscapes and landscapes like maps. For example, one convention of the topographic landscape often use is that of the bird's eye view. In such images the artist imagines (or, if possible, finds) a position high above the scene depicted. This allows the artist to describe multiple features in a landscape that from ground level would not all be visible.



Ills. #4.9 Lucantonio degli Uberti (after Francesco Rosselli), *Large View of Florence*, after 1480, woodcut, 57.8 x 131.6 cm, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin

Here is a map (ills. #4.9) that looks very much like a landscape. It depicts Florence and the original map from which this later copy was made dates from between 1471–82. Anyone familiar with the modern city can easily pick out Florence Cathedral and the Palazzo Vecchio, as well as a number of the city's other prominent churches. Other features, like the old city walls, no longer survive. The artist found it possible to create his bird's eye view by climbing to the top of the tower of Monte Oliveto, on the other side of the Arno from the main part of the city. From this vantage he could pick out many aspects of the city and surrounding countryside, to show us so many aspects of the city and



surrounding hillsides, although he omitted some details of the cityscape and exaggerated the size of others, to make them more visible. Many of the buildings and monuments are labeled. At the same time, the artist has effectively created a landscape in which natural forms, trees, hills, and water are inhabited by small human figures.



Ills. #4.10 Hendrik Cornelis Vroom, *View of Delft*, 1615, oil on canvas, 71 x 160 cm,  
Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft

Illustration #4.10 is an example of a landscape that has many of the qualities of a map. The painting is by a minor Dutch painter named Hendrik Cornelis Vroom and depicts the Dutch city of Delft in 1615. In this case, because Holland is a very flat country where there are few places offering vistas (and none around Delft), the painter assumes an impossible viewing position high above the buildings and canal in the foreground, so that we are able to look across a broad sweep of landscape, with a central canal and bridge, to the city walls and skyline. Dutch landscape paintings often have such low horizons, which offer profile views of the country's cities and towns. The remainder of these landscapes are devoted to high skies and interestingly shaped and lit clouds.

These profile views of Dutch cities are closely connected to Holland's sea-faring culture, where navigators drew on coastal landmarks as guides while at sea. Certainly most 17th-century Dutch artists painted and made prints of specific places, rendered with considerable precisions. Not surprisingly, in paintings which depict 17th-century Dutch interiors, one finds that the Dutch were as fond of hanging maps as decorations in their homes as landscapes. In Johannes Vermeer's *Allegory of Painting* (ills.



#2.10), an elaborate map is prominently featured on the back wall of the artist's studio. Framing the map itself are profile depictions of prominent Dutch cities and towns, in configuration very close to Vroom's *View of Delft*.



Ills. #4.11 Johannes Vermeer, *The View of Delft*, c. 1660–61, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 117.5 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague

Topographic landscapes often appear the least compositionally structured kind of landscape, especially when the artist's intent is to convey the maximum amount of information about a place, as in the case of Vroom's *View of Delft* illustrated above. When artists used optical devices to assist capturing a particular scene, this could result in images apparently so unstructured as to resemble modern snapshot photography. For example, we know that there is a considerable chance that the 17th-century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer used a device known as a *camera obscura*, Latin for dark chamber, to paint his *View of Delft*,



c. 1660-61 (ills. #4.6). A *camera obscura* was an enclosure with a single aperture, usually one or more mirrors to direct the light to the artist's working surface and a lens to focus the light. There are many variations of such devices, but regardless of the type employed, whatever is caught in the aperture would find its way onto the artist's working surface. And conversely, anything outside the lens' compass would be eliminated from the view. Perhaps this is why Vermeer's cityscape lacks any framing devices to close off the left and right side of the scene. Instead we are offered simply three planes, composed of a brightly lit beach, a darker water, especially where it reflects the town beyond, and the town itself, whose waterfront is in shadow, made more dramatically by areas of sunlit buildings behind.

Compared to Vroom's picture, Vermeer has sacrificed the opportunity to map out the city, since his ground-level profile view renders invisible much of what lies behind the first line of buildings and walls. Although both are topographic landscapes, between Vroom's picture and Vermeer's there is a subtle shift in intent. Vroom wants to show us what the entire city of Delft looked like in relation to each other—especially to articulate the architectural highlights of the city's skyline. Vermeer's optically dominant view privileges what can be seen from a singular vantage point versus what can be conceptually known about the city of Delft. It is that deflating of hierarchies and devaluing of a conceptual understanding of a place that makes Vermeer's painting look so modern compared to Vroom's. Of course, even in a painting that so strongly resembles a photograph, Vermeer still subtly employs landscape conventions to achieve convincing depth as well as visual interest for his view of Delft.

### Fantasy landscapes

If Dutch audiences especially admired and collected topographic landscape painting, elsewhere in Europe, and especially in Italy and France, different modes of landscape imagery were predominant, modes based more on the imagination of the artist than on observed reality. This is most strongly expressed in the type of landscapes we might call fantasy landscapes, nature as wholly imagined by the artist. When we think of Leonardo da Vinci's famous *Mona Lisa* (ills. #2.25), it is the woman, with her equally famous smile, who is most often the subject of our fascination. Also contributing to that aura of mystery that surrounds the *Mona Lisa* is the landscape setting in which Leonardo places her. There is little in the history of northern European landscape art that would have prepared the contemporary viewer for the scene that unfolds behind Leonardo's portrait. The model is positioned high up, as if she were in



some high tower. Visible to her left and right is a balustrade with the base of two classical columns visible on both sides. This high vantage point permits Leonardo to create a continuously rising landscape scene on both sides of his composition. So strange and mysterious are Leonardo's landscape elements in this picture that we hardly notice that the view on the left side of the painting is not coordinated with the view on the right side. How the two stretches of water, left and right, meet, and how they continue toward a mountain-bordered lake or sea is an irretrievable mystery hidden by Mona Lisa's head. Leonardo, of course, had never seen a landscape such as this. Nowhere in Italy, nowhere in the world known to Leonardo, are there natural environments that even vaguely resemble this scene.



Another spectacular example of a landscape imagined rather than seen is the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Issus*. In this picture Altdorfer imagines the ancient Greek war against the Persians led by Alexander the Great. Altdorfer depicts the climactic moment in the battle on the Issus river, when Alexander's army crushed the Persian forces of King Darius. In the lower center of the painting, among the mass of soldiers, one can make out Darius, retreating on his chariot while Alexander charges forward with his lance. Of course

Ills. #4.12 Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Battle of Issus*, 1529, oil on panel, 158.4 x 120.3 cm.,  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich (and detail)





Altdorfer could not have seen what he describes nor had he ever been to Turkey where the battle took place. Altdorfer sets the tumult of battle in the foreground against a panoramic view that extends so far back into the distance and embraces so much geography that it even encompasses the curvature of the world, and both the moon and the sun.

Altdorfer probably painted this work as a kind of historical allegory celebrating the recent victory of the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, over those of the Ottoman Empire under its greatest leader, the Emperor Suleiman, outside Vienna. This victory stopped the Islamic advance under the Ottoman Emperors into Western Europe after a century of military successes and the conquest of Greece, the Balkans, and much of Hungary and Bulgaria. Altdorfer found parallels to and historical comfort from the past triumph of the West (the Greeks under Alexander) over the East (the Persians under Darius) comparable to the modern victory of the European, Christian West over the Eastern, Muslim East.

#### Pastoral landscapes

Imaginative landscapes are rarely made up to the degree conceived by Leonardo and Altdorfer. Far more common are landscapes that draw from nature, but are idealized in some way. They too often show things that did not exist in the present, if ever, but painted as if they could have. A dominant type of these idealized landscapes is the pastoral landscape. Such paintings were inspired by ancient literary sources, in particular



the work of the Greek poet Theocritus, writing in the third century BC, and the Roman poet Virgil, whose *Eclogues* published around 38 BC were modeled in part on Theocritus's work. Both poets feature rustic heroes, peasants and shepherds, who typically become involved with the gods (Theocritus) or have to face revolutionary changes or happy or unhappy love (Virgil), set in a countryside that is distinctly opposed to the ordinary obligations and human concerns of urban life.



Ills. #4.13 Giorgione or Titian, *Concert Champêtre*, c. 1509, oil on canvas, 105 x 137 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

In such pastoral pictures, the painter typically depicts an ideal version of domesticated nature. The details of the landscape setting tend to be generalized, rather than specific to a certain place and time. It is also important to remember that pastoral landscapes were not painted for an audience of peasants or shepherds, but for the ruling classes, either urban merchant elites or the nobility. In so far as they can ever be considered representations of reality, the shepherds in these pastoral landscapes are treated the way the upper strata of society wished to regard their social inferiors; the pastoral landscape has very little to do with what contemporary life in agricultural communities was actually like, or farming, or, especially, the actual relationship between the European peasant class and those who owned the land.



One of the most famous early versions of the pastoral landscape is the painting attributed either to Titian or to Giorgione, which is in the Louvre in Paris and is known by a title given to it by the French, the *Concert Champêtre*, or country concert, painted in Venice around 1509. In this unusual yet influential painting, the artist represents two men in contemporary dress, one playing the lute, flanked by two naked women. Art scholars generally agree that the women are not intended to be real women at all, but rather idealizations, as perhaps muses of music and poetry. What drapery they possess suggests antique goddesses, and contrasts with the otherwise contemporary scene. The figures are set against a highly generalized landscape, with a shepherd tending his sheep in the middle right distance, then opening through a sunlit hillside to a distant view of some buildings, and beneath them, a barely articulated green valley and at least one mountain rising above the horizon.



Ills. #4.13 John Constable, Full-size sketch for *Stratford Mill*, 1819-20, oil on canvas, 184.2 x 130.8 cm, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

Variations on pastoral landscapes persisted alongside ideal landscapes until well into the 19th century. The English painter, John Constable, active during the first third of the 19th century, painted many images of rural England, that while far more topographically specific than



Giorgione's picture, still preserve the spirit of the pastoral landscape genre. For example, in *Stratford Mill*, 1820, Constable paints a specific place, one near his home in the county of Suffolk, on the river Stour. But his scene is suffused with the image of an untroubled rural leisure, men and boys fishing along the river or boating on the water. Constable, who came from a landowning family, paints an image of order and tranquility that effectively ignores the serious social unrest that troubled the English countryside during these years, as large landowners enclosed what had heretofore been common grounds, depriving many poor rural laborers the possibility of earning their livelihood. Peasants fought back by burning haystacks and barns. In the end, the rural poor were dispossessed of their ancient privileges and many were forced to move to the cities in the hopes of finding jobs. During this period London and other English cities experienced significant growth in the urban poor, who struggled perhaps under even worse conditions than they had in the countryside. Constable's painting then is both true to the site and at least partially false when it comes to how this landscape is depicted, and it is in this sense that the painting is a 'pastoral' landscape.

In the 18th and early-19th century European imagination, property represented wealth. Ownership of the land set one apart from non-owners, such as the urban middle classes, as well of course as the poor. Land ownership meant a constant stream of revenue derived from the peasants and small tenant holders who worked the property. When we read in Jane Austen's novels about an individual having such and such an income, her contemporaries would have always assumed that these monies were derived from the land as the only proper source of income for 'gentlemen.' It was only with the Industrial Revolution that the sense of money being related to property dissipated, as the great industrialists of Manchester and elsewhere came to rival in economic and political power the aristocratic landowners of the past. In this sense, Constable's landscapes are as much about ownership as they are about domesticated nature.

#### Ideal (heroic) landscapes

*Concert Champêtre* presents us with a landscape that appears neither to be precisely ancient nor contemporary, nor a reflection of a particular place. Constable's pastoral scene, conversely, is explicitly contemporary and just as explicitly located. There is also a third type of pastoral image that directly links the landscape to the ancient world, which we can think of as ideal or heroic landscapes (if containing an important story from Greco-Roman mythology or history). Such works sometimes included figures of gods and goddess, sometimes characters from ancient Roman history, and sometimes they simply include Greco-Roman architecture to



locate the 'time' of the painted scene to an imagined classical world. When human figures are present in such pictures, they are typically dressed in whatever the contemporary idea of what classical clothes should look like, or at least clothed in such a way as to suggest the antique. Besides the occasional elevated subject derived from mythology or ancient history, such landscapes typically render nature in pronouncedly generalized forms. For all these reasons we can think of this version of the pastoral landscape as an ideal landscape or an 'heroic' landscape when they incorporate significant narratives drawn from classical literature and history.



Ills. #4.15 Nicolas Poussin, *Orpheus and Euridice*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 124 x 200 cm,  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Elements of the ideal landscape tradition were first developed in Italian art in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, but it was not until the 17th century that this sub-genre of pastoral landscape tradition reached maturity. Interestingly, it was primarily achieved by French artists working in Rome rather than by Italian artists. A characteristic example can be found in the work of the French painter Nicolas Poussin, who spent most of his working career in Rome. In a picture like *Orpheus and Eurydice* (ills. #4.15), the artist gives us all the essential ingredients of a heroic landscape: classical architecture (inspired by buildings Poussin saw in Rome, but not a precise copy of any of them); a



mythological narrative, including the figure of Orpheus, singing accompanied by his lyre located in the foreground right, presumably with Eurydice reclining at his feet; and a generalized depiction of natural forms. Poussin painted the tree that acts as a coulisse on the right side of the composition in such a way that it would be impossible to identify the species. That same level of generalization is used throughout the composition, even including the cloud formations, which are too abstract in shape to be convincing as real clouds.

A similar idealized landscape was achieved by Claude Lorrain in his *Landscape with Nymph and Satyr Dancing* (ills. #4.1). Lorrain's scene is entirely made up, but it interestingly juxtaposes an ancient time, with its ruined round Roman temple and its gods in the foreground, and something suggestively modern in what looks like a distant view of a contemporary, presumably Italian, if generic, town, with crenellated walls and a church tower. The town, Lorrain seems to suggest, is where everyday reality resides, while fantasy and pleasure occupy the foreground.

#### The Sublime and the Picturesque

Two new categories for landscape became popular during the 18th century: the picturesque and the sublime. In 1756 the English philosopher Edmund Burke published his influential treatise *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in which he argued that we should not consider only things with our agreeable to our eye as beautiful, such as unity, order, simplicity, proportion, etc., but also should acknowledge the power of the dissonant, the turbulent, the rough, and violent, etc. to arouse powerful aesthetic reactions in the beholder. Burke's fed both the aesthetics of the picturesque and that of the sublime.

The picturesque became any place that owing to its unusual geographic features and generally pleasant viewing conditions would be of equal interest to the artist and to the tourist, and indeed the word originally meant something that was suitable for a painting, i.e., as pretty as a picture. As tourists we might seek to find some place, something that is beautiful and to account for why it is so. Eventually the picturesque came to mean in landscape painting rough, often wild natural views, of a specific place, in which humanity is either absent or represented as somehow physically connected to the landscape, but distinctly separate from the social identity of the modern, urban, Western viewer. Contemporary Arabs gathered below a pyramid in Egypt is picturesque; a contemporary Italian peasant watching over his sheep near an ancient Roman ruin is picturesque; and so on.



The picturesque landscape was grounded in the topographical tradition, but the places the picturesque describes are more noteworthy for their pleasing vistas than for the significance of the location, unlike Vroom's Delft. If one were English one might think of the highlands of Scotland or the Lake Country as places that provided abundant picturesque experiences. Other 18th and 19th-century artists found such places in Italy. Beginning in the 17th century, it became customary for young European elites to travel across Europe as a kind of educational rite of passage known as the 'Grand Tour' before entering independent adulthood. Initially, the Grand Tour usually meant northern European male aristocrats who traveled by various, often circuitous routes, to Italy with visits to Venice and Rome as necessary stopping places. The Grand Tour later came to include young women with their chaperones, and more broadly, members of the upper middle class, and the object of the tour extended far from southern Europe to the Americas and beyond. The Grand Tour was in essence the beginning of modern tourism.



Ills. #4.16 Jakob Philipp Hackert, *The Waterfalls at Tivoli*, 1785, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 171 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

The Grand Tour also had its pictorial equivalent in the many northern European artists who, for various lengths of time, took up residence in Italy. For example, the 18th-century German landscape painter Jakob Philipp Hackert painted many different kinds of picturesque landscapes



usually set in Italy, like this one of the waterfalls at Tivoli, near Rome (ills. #4.16). The hills above the falls are dotted with the ruins of Roman temples and Renaissance villas, lending the scene visual interest but also topographical specificity. In the lower left Hackert paints an Italian herdsman with his cattle. The Tivoli falls are impressive as they cascade over a series of cliffs, but they are not overwhelming; the violence of the falling water fails to disturb the quietly grazing herd nor is the scene troubled by the calm blue skies overhead.

The sublime, the other new category of landscape, emphasized in contrast to the picturesque the irrational qualities of the aesthetic experience. The sublime exists when one is confronted by something (usually nature) so vast that it becomes incalculable, immeasurable, so that one's response is to be horrified or overwhelmed emotionally by the experience. In the landscapes of the Romantic era, that is to say, during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, artists looked to arouse an emotional reaction with their paintings. Sublime landscapes portrayed nature as an overwhelming force against which humanity is helpless. In such images nature is either violent, as in storms at sea, or overwhelming in scale, like the Alps in Europe, or later, the American Rocky Mountains.



Ills. #4.17 J. M. W. Turner, Snow Storm--Hannibal Crossing the Alps, 1812, oil on canvas  
144.8 x 236.2 cm, Tate Britain, London



The Romantic British artist William Turner frequently painted the sublime. A characteristic example is his version of the story of the ancient Carthaginian general, Hannibal, who cross the Alps in 218 BCE to make war on Rome in Italy (ills. #4.15). Similar to Altdorfer's much earlier fantasy landscape of The Battle of Issus, Turner paints a vast Alpine vista. In Turner's case, however, the artist had actually visited the part of the Alps that inspired this view of an Alpine pass. To this Turner added a rising snowstorm, which perhaps was based on one he had once experienced while visiting Yorkshire. In Turner's painting the storm will soon blot out the sun, threatening Hannibal's army with extinction. Some have been crushed by boulders, others raise their arms in despair. The struggling army snakes across the bottom of Turner's painting, aiming toward the mountain pass above that will lead to the sunlight fields of Italy that lie in the distant center.

#### The Impressionist landscape

During the 19th century, partly in response to the invention of photography, landscape artists, when painting directly from nature, or in *plein air*, as the French termed it, increasingly chose to paint their



Ills. #4.18 Claude Monet, *The Poplars near Argenteuil*, 1875, oil on canvas, 54.6 x 65.4 cm,  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



visual impression of the scene rather than to record what they conceptually already knew about what they saw. Compared to an Impressionist painting by the French artist Claude Monet (ills. #4.18), Hackert's landscape appears stylized and made up of a series of highly conventionalized techniques.

Precise in detail, Hackert's painting seems barely to move with life. Hackert's palette of colors has a very limited range of earth tones, black, white and blue. He relies entirely on local color, where a single shade of a green or brown is modeled with varying degrees of lights and darks to create the illusion of three-dimensional form and of light passing across surfaces. Monet, in contrast, sacrificed the details of the scene to the myriad effect of light as a prism of color falling on surfaces, which the artist recorded in discrete touches of color. In Monet's picture there is little movement and nothing seems to be happening. And yet the landscape appears far more alive than Hackert's. Suffused with rich colors, the painted surface of Monet's picture appears to be in constant motion, as our eyes are caught by one detail or color and then another.

In a sense, our experience of Monet's picture matches the artist's own fluid, and seemingly rapid recording of the dense variety of his sense perceptions. Yet even Monet resorts to a coulisse in his *Poplars near Argenteuil*, which give the painting not only its title, but serves to balance the foreground view center and left with the distant view on the right (which is also distinguished from the foreground by a change in palette as the field in which the woman sits drops down into a valley, which is characterized by the great use of blue and by deeper greens). Nonetheless, the ambition of Monet and the other Impressionist painters of the 1870s and 1880s to register their optical sensations while painting in plein air directly from nature helped to bring to a close landscape traditions that had prevailed in Western art since the 15th century. From the Impressionists forward landscape became increasingly the occasion to explore not the external world around us but our internal perceptual and psychological response to external stimulants. Ostensibly, *The Poplars near Argenteuil* is an objective record of a specific place under specific lighting conditions at a specific time. But it is also a record of the inwardly directed perceptions and artistic decisions of Monet; it is as much therefore a personal 'expression' of reality as its literal transcription.

Landscape painting took two, closely related, tracks out of Monet's art. In one direction was an idea of landscape freed from the obligation to paint what can be seen, but rather to make of the landscape what could



be felt. Here is where artists began to think about how color and form could be used as expressive instruments in their own right, rather than merely as tools to create the illusion of three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface. The Post-Impressionist French artist, Paul Gauguin,



Ills. #4.19 Paul Gauguin, *By the Sea*, 1892, oil on canvas, 67.9 x 91.5 cm, Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

who began his career painting as an Impressionist under the direct tutelage of the Impressionist artist Camille Pissarro, eventually pursued a conception of landscape in which color and form were suggestive of emotional or even spiritual conditions independent of the reality depicted. When Gauguin left Europe for Tahiti early in the 1890s, he sent back to his European art dealers images of fantasy tropical landscapes, rendered in intense color and increasingly abstract forms (ills. #4.19). In *By the Sea* a tree undulates, like the flattened body of a great snake across the canvas, strewn with orange flowers and rhythmically echoing the shape of a purple-colored beach. The bathing Tahitians are rendered somewhat more three-dimensionally, but the overall effect of the painting is one of an unworldly, color-saturated paradise, far removed from the grey colored skies of northern Europe.

The second, parallel track out of Monet's Impressionism was taken by his contemporary and friend Paul Cézanne. Cézanne famously claimed to want to recreate Poussin after nature. We can understand what the artist



meant by this phrase as Cézanne's desire to maintain the optical qualities of Impressionism, the desire to paint precisely what is seen rather than what is known, while giving new structure to the Impressionist landscape. In Monet's paintings, especially as the artist grew older, the forms in his landscapes tended to dissolve under the complex touches of color. Cézanne did not want to structure his paintings using Poussin's landscape conventions—that would be to put knowing before seeing—but rather to achieve a Poussin-like structure through the application of the paint itself. Over time, Cézanne's touches of paint grew larger than that of his Impressionist colleagues and he applied these touches in parallel strokes, almost like building blocks spread across the surface of his painting. In the process, Cézanne came to emphasize his pictures' surfaces as much as the depth they conveyed (see ill. #4.20). And indeed Cézanne so often closely linked a surface plane to a plane in great depth,

a device that later was described with the French term "passage", that he flattened the three-dimensional space of his landscapes, locking surface and depth together. What from a distance reads as a green shrubbery and trees before a distant, orange hill becomes when viewed in detail nothing more than adjacent strokes of color in different hues (and the sheer number of different colors Cézanne so often uses in his pictures is also quite remarkable).



Ills. #4.20 Paul Cézanne, *The Bend in the Road*, c. 1900-05, oil on canvas, 82.1 x 66 cm, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC





Cézanne's desire to lock surface and depth together is perhaps one reason why Cézanne often left large portions of his landscapes unpainted (which he rarely did in other types of paintings). As in *The Bend in the Road* many of Cézanne's landscapes have often been described as unfinished; this ignores how Cézanne used the white of the canvas as a pictorial element, contributing as much to our experience of what we see as the painted portions. The bare white canvas in *The Bend in the Road* reads as the intense light of the Mediterranean sun.

As we will see in chapter 8, the expressive use of color and form, independent of observed reality, along with Cézanne's insistence on a painting as an arrangement of color strokes across the surface of the canvas, led eventually to artists freeing the landscape from references to reality altogether and to the rise of non-objective art. It is why abstract art began as a landscape genre and why even today many non-objective paintings continue to convey the feel of landscape without actually depicting anything from the natural world. It was around 1910 that the lessons of Cézanne, Gauguin, and other artists of the Post-Impressionist generation inspired a younger generation of artists to liberate color and form from observed reality. A characteristic example of this transition into non-objective painting can be seen in this 1910





Ills. #4.21 Vasily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 10*, 1910, oil on canvas, 120 x 140 cm,  
The Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel

painting by the Russian-born, Munich-residing artist Vasily Kandinsky (ills. #4.21). If one is familiar with Kandinsky's pictures prior to *Improvisation 10*, one is better able to decode some of the referential imagery still contained in this picture. We can make out at least two figures in the lower left, set against a brown hill or mountain, which we might consider the foreground of what is essentially a landscape. We are guided visually across the canvas and back into the scene by sweeping arcs of black lines, which reach out like tendrils to a city or castle on a hill (top right). Further back and to the center, we can possibly make out a mountain vista. In this compositional structure, and perhaps without even realizing it, Kandinsky preserved a number of the time-honored conventions for structuring spatial recession in landscape painting. But of course the forms depicted barely register as belonging to the world we know. Line and color are meant, at least according to the



artist himself, to convey 'spiritual vibrations', to emote, rather than to show the world. This is why Kandinsky chose a musical term, improvisation, to describe his picture. He wanted the viewer to experience his canvas the way we hear music, as a series of tones conveyed within a certain structure that arouses both an emotional and an intellectual response from the viewer/hearer.

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## On still lifes

### A peculiar genre

Still life means the careful portrayal of inanimate objects. Of all the major genres, still life has been mostly strongly restricted to a single medium: painting. Landscapes, portraits, genre scenes, history imagery, and so on, all have been represented in multiple media. But one rarely finds still lifes outside of painting. There are even only a limited number of photography still lifes—as art photographs—outside the world of product advertising. The production and consumption of still life painting has also been more culturally specific than other genres.



The modern origins of still life can be traced to 15th-century Flemish painting that brought the religious message into a contemporary setting, as exemplified by Robert Campin's Merode altarpiece (see detail of ill. #1.12). The table resting between the angel of the Annunciation and Mary is a virtual still life, containing as it does a book, a candle, and a bouquet of flowers. Not surprisingly, then, the still life genre grew to maturity in late 16th-century Flanders and early 17th-century Holland. The



Dutch went on to become Europe's most passionate producers and consumers of still life painting. 17th-century Spanish, French, and German artists also created some strikingly beautiful still lifes, but it was not a dominant genre in any of those countries. In Italy, still life painting was rarely practiced and there are only a handful of noteworthy Italian still life paintings from the 16th and 17th centuries. British artists and collectors demonstrated even less interest in still life painting, a disinterest that persisted for at least three hundred years. There are no significant English still life painters (except those imported from abroad). On the other hand, there is a strong tradition of still-life painting in 18th- and 19th-century America.

Still life is also the most strictly scaled of all the genres. One can paint a large or a small portrait of a person relative to the size of the canvas or panel, or a portrait can be anything from a miniature to larger than life-size. Similarly one can create a landscape that shows only a small corner of nature or create a vast panorama in the manner of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. But still lifes, until very recently at least, have been closely scaled to the size of the objects they depict. In fact, still lifes tend toward the life-size, or at least life-size as depicted within the recessed space of the painting. With most still life paintings one can imagine that the depicted objects are all within reach of the viewer's arms, were one miraculously able to reach through the picture plane to pick them up. That still lifes almost always occupy very shallow pictorial space carefully fixes the viewer's position in relation to the objects viewed, so that there is no perspective from which the illusion will fall apart. This is one reason why still lifes achieve the highest level of illusionism offered in Western painting.

In the early years of still life painting, artists tended simply to arrange their objects lined up parallel to the surface plane of their picture. Later, and especially in the hands of 17th-century Dutch still life painters, the arrangements become more complex. Many of the objects depicted are expensive household wares, delicate glasses, richly embossed metal plates and bowls, as well as rare flowers, fruit and other items imported from far away lands, which reference Holland's global trading empire in the 17th century.

Despite featuring natural objects, such as fruit, flowers and dead fauna, still lifes rarely look 'natural.' Still life artists almost always present their audiences with obviously arranged objects that only minimally pretend to be ordered by chance. In still life, and especially in 17th-century still lifes, no one object is privileged over any other object found in the painting. Nor is an object isolated from all others.

Still life artists always ask their viewers to look at everything. To look at a still life is to take into view all the objects it contains. Still life artists sometimes contrive to make the viewer work to do this. We walk into a gallery and see a bouquet of flowers. Only on close inspection does the bouquet become like a forest inhabited by butterflies, beetles, and other insects, as well as small and usually precious things we might have overlooked at first glance.

Still life painting, more than any other genre, is about the artist looking, about the artist contemplating his or her subject. Since still lifes are almost always painted for an anonymous market, the artist has no external obligations except to make something that by the excellence of its craftsmanship is likely to sell. Freed from most external constraints, the artist's shares his or her pleasure in looking and in making with the viewer. This is because, of all the genres, still life is the one that most privileges the artist as craftsman. With illusion as the usual measure of artistic achievement, the still life painter demonstrates his or her skill to make real objects in three dimensions that in fact consist only of paint on a two-dimensional plane.

#### Still lifes, religion and antiquity

In still life, story telling, ideas, and imagination all appear as extraneous, even unnecessary elements to the artist's achievement. It is for all these reasons that 17th-century French aestheticians and the artists who belonged to the French Royal Academy—an institution created precisely to lift the arts above the level of craftsmanship—regarded still life painting as the least important genre. The Academicians believed that important art should depict the human body engaged in significant historical, mythological or religious narratives.

Despite academic disapproval, even in the 17th century still lifes were intensely popular with collectors; there were even a number of superb French painters who specialized in still life during this period, which is an indication of how large the market demand was for such pictures even in Academy-dominated France. How, therefore, did still life come to be judged so low and yet be so highly prized? Perhaps it was because although its objects were generally humble they referenced five things very important to Europeans when the genre reached maturity in the 16 and 17th centuries: 1) the revival of antiquity, which meant a renewed interest in the art, literature and general culture of the ancient Greco-Roman world; 2) the use of many common objects as religious symbols; 3) the perennial fascination with illusionism and visual games and tricks; 4) the genre's close association with the rise of modern science; and 5) the ownership of things that often represented the economic achievements of



the individuals and the societies that supported the creation of such paintings.

Like landscape, still life painting was a revival of a lost ancient genre. Still lifes were common in the ancient world, particularly as interior decoration, often painted directly onto a wall in fresco or imaged on the floor in mosaic. Sometimes still lifes were used as market signs for the illiterate, signaling the nature of the shop whose walls the still life adorned. But as with landscape, antique achievements in still life painting, or *xenia*, as they are called, were not rediscovered through excavations until the end of the 18th century. Yet the concept of painting still life was kept alive through classical texts that recounted the achievements of ancient painters. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder, for example, told the story of the Greek painter Zeuxis, who painted grapes so faithfully that birds tried to peck at them. Zeuxis was fooled in turn by his rival Parrhasius, who painted a curtain drawn over a picture so faithfully that Zeuxis attempted to remove it in order to see the painting beneath.

Renaissance humanist scholars and their patrons knew these texts, and since the scholars' patrons were also often the artists' patrons, when still life was revived as a genre one of its attributes was its connection to classical learning. For example, it has been argued that when the



Ills. #5.1 Pieter Aertsen, *Christ with Mary and Martha*, 1552, oil on panel, 60 x 101.5 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



16th-century Antwerp painter Pieter Aertsen painted large market scenes (usually with a biblical scene in the background) he was making references to classical literature, and would have been understood as doing so by his patrons. In *Christ with Mary and Martha* (ills. #5.1), Aertsen painted in the foreground a 16th-century kitchen, complete with meat for cooking, dish ware and tablecloths ready for dining. The background scene is set against a classicized, elaborately ornate fireplace that frames Christ with Mary and Martha. The fireplace feature may signal some of the classicizing intentions of the artist, but it is an element that would have in any case appealed to the tastes of a certain kind of client, someone who might want to possess both the painting and the kind of fireplace represented in it.

On the surface the Biblical scene in Aertsen's picture contrasts fairly dramatically with the humble market goods and utensils in the foreground. Yet it is these objects that first catch our eye and they continue to dominate our view of the scene, because of their relative size compared to the Christian narrative in the background. So, besides possibly exemplifying a sophisticated humanist acquaintance with antique culture, Aertsen's painting announces a different way of viewing religious stories, turning the world inside out as it were, featuring the least important while marginalizing the most important. We saw a similar effect last chapter in a painting by another Antwerp artist, Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (ills. #4.5), a painting that similarly privileges the mundane in the foreground and pushes its ostensible primary subject into the distance.

To the religion-saturated culture of 16th-century Europe these familiar things that occupy the foreground of Aertsen's painting—meat, bread, flowers, cups, and sundry—all symbolically reinforced the Christian narrative found at the rear. Aertsen's picture, for example, features a vase of flowers standing prominently in the upper middle right of his composition. In antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages certain flowers were associated with certain meanings. Red carnations, which we see in this vase, were popularly believed to have bloomed just before Christ's death and therefore symbolize the sins Christ's sacrifice redeemed. The grapes and vines behind the carnations reference a parable from the New Testament where Christ likens himself to the vine to be followed by the devout. The grape vine was also a common symbol for prosperity; Aertsen's kitchen, with its abundance of things, would certainly have appealed to a class of wealthy patrons, who might see their possessions, as well as their piety, mirrored in his painting.



Similarly, the first independent still lives in northern Europe featured either flowers or objects imbued with religious significance. For example, the 15th-century Flemish artist Hans Memling painted on the back of a picture portraying St. Veronica (ills. #5.2) a *trompe l'oeil* (a French term literally meaning 'deceives the eye') representation of a golden chalice (ills. #5.3) said to belong to St. John the Evangelist. This panel was probably originally part of a diptych, likely joined by hinges to a portrait of the person who commissioned the work. Artists often depicted the donors' coats of arms on the back of their portraits. So, when a diptych like this was folded up for storage, the still life and the coat of arms would have been the exposed parts of the diptych, subject to the most wear. This is indicative of the relative value at this time of the still life panel of the painting compared to religious and portrait panels.



Ills. #5.2 and #5.3 Hans Memling, *St. Veronica holding her veil* and *The Chalice of St. John the Evangelist*, c. 1479–83, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Underlying religious and moral meanings are rarely missing from the still life genre throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. However, as in the case of the other genres, still life benefited from the increasing middle-class demand for art to hang on walls in domestic, rather than

religious, interiors. The production of art intentionally designed as interior decoration encouraged the gradual secularization of the still life genre, and the emergence of sub-genres, as well as artists who specialized exclusively in still-life painting. In the 17th century, particularly in the Dutch Republic, new compositional formats, subject matter, and distinct sub-genres for still life emerged. Among them are *vanitas* paintings, *trompe l'oeil* and game pieces, flower paintings, still lifes with fruit and flowers, and what are often called 'breakfast' pieces.

### **Varieties of still life**

#### *Vanitas and memento mori*

Like Memling's *trompe l'oeil* chalice, many 16th and 17th-century still lifes possess features that refer to human vanity or, in the Latin, *vanitas*. *Vanitas* still lifes contain symbols of death (like a human skull) or point to the transitoriness of existence (like a precious, yet



Ills. #5.4 Pieter Claesz, *Still life with skull and a writing quill*, 1628, oil on panel, 24.1 x 35.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

fragile overturned glass) and therefore to death's inevitability. These reminders of death, again from the Latin, are known as *memento mori*. In the painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Claesz (ills. #5.4), skull and



glass are joined by an incense burner whose stick (as a metaphor for life) has almost burned out. Human achievements and human memory are embodied in the writing instrument, the quill, its sharpener, what may be an inkpot, and the books, which are effectively trumped by the skull that sits on them. As such, the painting is a virtual catalogue of reminders of human mortality and of the impermanence of human accomplishments. At about 9 x 14 inches, the objects appear in scale to the distance from which we view them, as if they were indeed on some table we happened upon. The artist demonstrates his skill at painting the different textures and quality of light on the surfaces of a clay incense holder, of crinkled pieces of paper in some thicker paper wrapper, of bone and the complex shape of a human skull, and of glass, in this case, an example of expensive Venetian glassware often found in Dutch still lifes. On two sides of the glass we see the double reflection of the window that lights our scene. Each object is intrinsically interesting. Each object demonstrates the painter's skill at showing a different texture under light. Each object pretends as if it were really there and not some thing painted by human hand.

Until the 18th century virtually all painters of still lifes made at least indirect reference to the futility of human striving, whether after beauty, or wealth, or learning, or art. However still lifes and flower pictures preserve that which in life quickly passes. Flowers wilt, fruit rot, while paintings survive. In this sense, still lifes illustrated another Latin motto: *ars longa vita brevis* (art is long, but life is short). Art preserves a moment in time. What looks to be casually composed by Pieter Claesz, as if these objects at some moment were thrown together, are fixed in space and time for as long as the painting lasts.

### *Trompe l'oeil*

*Tromp l'oeil* was one of the most popular forms of still life painting during the 16th and 17th centuries because audiences delighted in the visual trickery it represents. While *trompe l'oeil* illusions are found in other kinds of painting, they were most easily achieved in still life, because its very shallow, restricted spaces were most conducive to achieving *trompe l'oeil* effects. A typical still life is not visually complex; the viewer's position is easily fixed directly in front of the still life and the represented space need appear to penetrate no more than a foot behind the picture plane and mostly no more than a few inches.

Until the late 19th century all still lifes produced a *trompe l'oeil* effect to some degree. But some still lifes are more obviously concerned with creating such visual deceptions than are others.





Ills. #5.5 Cornelis Gijsbrechts, *Vanitas Still Life*, c. 1660s, oil on canvas, 84.4 x 78.1 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

16th- and 17th-century artists invented many versions of *trompe l'oeil* to delight and amuse their audiences. Artists sometimes painted illusionistic curtains over their painted still lifes, echoing Parrhasius' feat. Or, as the Flemish artist Cornelis Gijsbrechts does here (ills. #5.5), they created visual paradoxes that reveal one illusion only to create another. Gijsbrechts seemingly destroys the illusion of his vanitas still life by painting a corner of his canvas torn away from its wooden stretchers (this is also in keeping with vanitas imagery, since it shows even the impermanence of works of art). But in defeating one



illusion, he creates another, of which we might not at first be aware. Studied more closely we see that the still life with its painted stone niche and torn canvas is a painting hanging on a wall, whose surface is visible in the narrow band on the right, which also contains a shadow of the painted niche on its surface. The real illusion, however, is what looks like a polished wood pole, what may be a painter's mahlstick (a straight rod with a padded end that can be propped against a painting to steady the artist's hand while working). The mahlstick stretches across both the depicted still life and the edge of depicted wall. So while it may initially have appeared to be part of the still life in the niche, it is now revealed to be in front of both painted niche and the wall, as if it were propped up against the real, physical edge of Gijsbrechts' picture.

An equally clever *trompe l'oeil* artist was the Italian painter, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, whose allegory of spring was briefly discussed in the first chapter (see ill. #1.1). Not only does Arcimboldo offer us a head of a man composed of summer foodstuffs, he clothes his figure in strands of wheat, and within these strands 'weaves' his name (in the collar) and the painting's date (on the shoulder sleeve). Instead of painting stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as so many artists did, Arcimboldo constantly displayed the power of art to metamorphose any one thing from the world into another. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Gijsbrechts was a favorite painter of the king of Denmark and that Arcimboldo worked for many years for Rudolf II, the Holy Roman Emperor. The stature they enjoyed with these monarchs is indicative of the delight audiences took, including kings, and still take in the visual puzzles they created.

Variations on the *trompe l'oeil* 'wooden panel' with objects attached can be found in Western painting right through to the end of the 19th century. One of the most notable practitioners of this sub-genre was the American painter, William Harnett. Inside a wooden frame (ill. #5.6), which is actually part of the canvas painting, Harnett paints another wooden frame (creating a two-fold illusion), with a door, slightly ajar, on which hang musical instruments, a piece of sheet music, and a horseshoe. The painting is so precisely rendered that the notes and lyrics of the music are easily read. The objects stand out from the painted door (since they are viewed almost straight on) by the shadows they cast from a light source above and to the left of the objects. Similarly Harnett paints false shadows cast by the exterior frame on the "painting" inside. A painted key lock is the only object that is both in the "painting" and on the exterior frame as well.



Ills. #5.6 William Harnett, *Still Life--Violin and Music*, 1888, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 76.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

### Flower painting and botanical illustrations

The earliest and one of the most important sub-genres of still life to emerge was flower painting. Initially, this was because flower pictures retained a high degree of religious symbolism, as we have seen in the paintings by Campin and Aertsen. But flower pictures also belonged to the development of scientific knowledge about the natural world. As a genre they are closely related to the long tradition of illustrated herbals. These are books devoted to the classification of plants and their uses. During the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, such books, especially the early printed books, were quite primitive in their depiction of the plants discussed in the texts. By the 16th century, however, they had begun to be illustrated by images of considerable sophistication that identified all the parts of a given plant. One of the most influential of these 16th-century herbals was created by the German botanist Leonhart Fuchs, whose *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes* (*Notable commentaries on the history of plants*) was published in 1542, complete with hundreds of



woodblock prints (ills. #5.8). In the edition that is in Cambridge University's library, the woodblocks were subsequently hand-colored. This volume also gives us the first image of scientific illustrators in Western culture (ills. #5.9): Heinrich Füllmaurer and Albertus Meyer who made the drawings and Vitus Rodolph, who cut the woodblocks.



Ills. #5.8 Heinrich Füllmaurer, Albertus Meyer and Vitus Rodolph, Helxine (in the nettle family), in Leonhart Fuchs, *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes* (Notable commentaries on the history of plants). Classmark: Sel.2.81. Basel, 1542, courtesy of the Cambridge University Library, Cambridge

Ills. #5.9 Heinrich Füllmaurer, Albertus Meyer ("pictores") and Vitus Rodolph. Speckle ("sculptor") in Leonhart Fuchs, *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes*, 1542

Fuchs based his herbal on surviving botanical texts from the ancient Greco-Roman world. The precision of his descriptions, and the quality of the illustrations, however, advanced botanical knowledge well beyond his antique sources. And yet it is worth noting that even here, at the dawn of modern science, the cover page to Fuch's treatise (ills. #5.10) prominently features a holly tree with its red berries. According to an apocryphal Christian story, the blood of Christ turned what had been the original white berries of the holly red. And the holly leaf's sharp edges similarly references the crown of thorns worn by Christ at the Crucifixion. These are reminders of how closely images of the natural



world remained bound to Christian theology, connections that were not fully jettisoned from still life painting until near the end of the 17th century.



Ills. #5.10 Leonhart Fuchs, Cover illustration (and detail), *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes*, 1542

An artist working in oil paint could render with much greater precision the characteristics of particular flowers than a woodblock illustration, no matter how carefully drawn. This is evident in the pictures by the great flower painter, Jan Brueghel the Elder, one of the sons of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The 'flower' Brueghel, as he is called, specialized in complex flower arrangements that incorporated flowers that bloom at different times of the year (ills. #5.11). He created paintings that are extraordinarily lifelike, yet they are also extraordinarily artificial, offering his viewers something that in the 17th century could only be achieved through art: the juxtaposition and preservation of many species of flowers in a single view. His contemporaries would have understood Brueghel's painting to be superior to nature.

17th-century collectors coveted the 'flower' Brueghel's pictures for their encapsulation of nature in a single visual catalogue, and for his





Ills. #5.11, Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Flower Study with a Copper Vase*, c. 1599, oil on canvas, 73 x 59 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

*trompe l'oeil* effects. Brueghel painted in such a way that the presence of the artist's hand is unnoticeable except when viewed from very close. Only then does one see how Brueghel used alterations of thick and thinly applied touches of paint to heighten the visual relief and separation between the painting's different features, so that each flower, each petal is clearly articulated. Similarly, although we know that Brueghel painted a round vase, from which presumably a circular arrangement of flowers would result, in fact, if we think about what he actually shows us, all his flowers are aligned parallel to the picture plane and each blossom constitutes a bright light of color against the dark background.

It was also during this period that European explorers extended Western knowledge of the world further and further around the globe. At the conclusion of these voyages of discovery, they brought back to Europe many heretofore nondescript species of flora and fauna. Whether or not a



plant was edible or had medicinal purposes were important things to know. Organizing all of these wonders from the four corners of the world represented an increasing challenge. Scholars in the 17th century began to develop systems of classification. In a sense, Brueghel's flower paintings represent a catalogue of flowers, to be as much studied as admired for their beauty, a catalogue of flowers drawn from the four corners of the world.

Finally, still lifes may all be said to refer to possessions and to ownership and flower paintings are no exception. The Dutch especially developed a passion for flower cultivation, and especially for tulips. In the 1630s a speculative market in tulip bulbs arose; speculators bought and sold single tulip bulbs for prices equaling ten times the annual salary of a skilled craftsman. The eventual collapse of this bubble market is still studied by economists today. In Dutch hands, a flower, then, was not only seen as a fleeting object of nature, but was also in a very real sense an important commodity.

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries flower pictures resembled *trompe l'oeil* painting in the sense that they were depicted within shallow spaces, as clearly defined objects, seen from straight on. As the genre matured artists began to add different kinds of objects to their compositions, especially fruit. And, over time, the arrangement of fruit and flowers grew more elaborate and more informal, so that they begin to lose the maximum visibility of pictures like Brueghel's in favor of more decorative effects. The increasing number of women who became artists in the 17th century often chose to specialize in flower painting because the subject was thought to be more feminine and decorative and therefore appropriate subject matter for women artists.

### Breakfast pictures

The last principal variation on the still life genre for 17th-century Flemish and Dutch artists were what art historians have called 'breakfast' or 'luncheon' pictures. The artist would arrange his objects on a table with seeming informality, as if one were present at an only recently abandoned meal. Such pictures offered their clients multiple meanings and multiples ways in which they could be appreciated. They could, of course, suggest the vanity of earthly possessions. But they also clearly reveled in these possessions. These pictures are simply crammed with luxury commodities. Like most Dutch still life paintings, Willem Claesz Heda's 1634 still life (ills. #5.12) indexes the country's global trade and the wealth this trade created. Dutch merchants shipped common and rare commodities from all points of the known world. Not coincidentally, the Dutch also gave us the first stock exchange, where goods were bought and





Ills. #5.12 Willem Claesz Heda, *Still Life*, 1634, oil on panel, 44.5 x 62 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

sold and brokers speculated on the rise and fall of commodity prices. Heda's picture reflects the mercantile dimension of Dutch culture: the lemons and nuts are imported from warmer climates. The glass is probably from Venice. The fruit dish, the plates, and drinking mug are made of expensive metals, chased with elaborate designs.

Heda's painting possesses these desirable items purely through the act of making them visible. Although we can neither eat the nuts nor drink from the glass, in the astonishing exactness of Heda's rendering of glass and metal his picture rivals the handicraft of the artisans who made these luxury goods in the first place. His painting becomes as desirable if not more desirable than the objects he represents. Heda delights in portraying the subtle surface qualities of these objects and the different ways substances absorb or reflect light. Though his objects are frozen in space and time, Heda still manages to show us as much of these objects as the eye can possibly take in from a single viewing position. He overturns the fruit dish so that we can see the complexity of its design, the drinking mug is open, the wine glass half full (giving the artist the opportunity to contrast the transparency of empty glass with that of liquid), and the lemon, which is both sliced open and partially peeled to reveal its juicy pulp and white rind. Heda even gives us the lemon's reflection, mirrored in the silver plate.



### Autonomous still life

The exploration of vision and the pure delight in the craftsmanship of painting exemplified by Heda's still life eventually led artists to paint still lifes just for themselves, without ulterior moral, religious or even scientific purpose. It is not always a simple matter to discern when the objects in a still life are represented in this way, but as a rule of thumb, throughout the 17th century still lifes were promoted to the attention of art audiences through the argument that they were concerned with higher things beyond the mere representation of objects. In the 18th century, however, artists increasingly took a secular, non-moralizing approach to the genre. Still life became in effect more purely decorative than in the previous century. And where 17th-century artists measured the quality of craftsmanship by the ability to create a three-dimensional illusion in which the artist's touches of paint on canvas or panel are barely visible, now increasingly an artist's skill was to be measured by the quality of the paint application to create light and texture. In these later still lifes we are intended to see both the painted surface



Ills. #5.13 Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Wine Carafe, Silver Goblet and Fruit*, c. 1728 (and detail) , oil on canvas, 43 x 49.5 cm, St. Louis Art Museum





and the illusion it creates.

Far more than the Dutch still life painters he admired, the 18th-century French still life painter, Jean-Siméon Chardin clearly shows on the surface of his pictures (see ill. #5.13) the strokes of paint used to create a reflection (see the white stroke that becomes the reflection on the silver cup) or creates a texture (the smooth surface of the cherries, the rough surface of the peaches). This concentration on the touch and virtuoso handling of paint would be enormously influential on subsequent still life painters over the next century and more. What is new in the history of still life painting about Chardin's work is that his pictures reflect on what it means to try to find a physical equivalent, in strokes of paint on canvas, of a perception. His still lifes possess an unusual visual tactility; we get from his pictures a strong sense of physical touch, which extends beyond simply seeing his touches of paint on canvas to a sense that the objects themselves have been somehow handled and manipulated. Moreover, nothing in a Chardin still life is clearly articulated. It is as if the artist were acknowledging the limits of vision and our ability to record what our eyes see.



When Heda painted a still life, he painted not what he saw, as paradoxical as this statement may seem, but what he knew to be there. Of course, Heda painted every reflection and texture of the objects posed on his tables. But these reflections and textures are an assemblage of information, the recorded summation of a host of perceptions to which Heda probably paid little attention. Heda's paintings look like photographs, but we must remember that neither Heda's pictures nor photographs actually resemble the way we visually experience the world. For example, like many photographs, everything in Heda's picture is painted with the same level of distinctness. And when Heda paints a color, he uses a single color, like yellow, and then adds white or some dark color to shade the yellow from a very bright to a very dark tone, and uses these gradations to make the shape of the lemon appear three-dimensional (this is the same technique we discussed in Hackert's landscape painting in the previous chapter).

As scientists increasingly asked questions about the nature of vision, about how we see qualities like color, as well as the shape of our field of vision, the confidence Heda expressed in the distinctness of form or the uniform identity of a color began to evaporate. Exploring optics, scientists discovered that the retina does not see everything equally (it is why we turn our heads and our pupils constantly move as we look at things). This led some artists to conclude that paintings must therefore necessarily have a visual focus (an area of distinctness with everything else in shadow or indistinct) so that in this way the picture could resemble vision. Similarly scientists followed by artists began to ask comparable questions about the nature of color. Where does the color of a lemon, like the one Heda painted, reside? Is the yellow a property of the skin of the lemon so that when light hits the lemon this property is released? If so, how is this color different from the colors that appear in a prism, which adhere to no object? Why is it that colors appear differently depending on lighting conditions and on the adjacent colors? Perhaps the yellow is carried to the lemon by the rays of light? Or perhaps the yellow is created in the human mind out of light patterns imposed on the retina?

These kinds of questions began to change the way artists thought about painting. Instead of painting in Heda's straightforward, if scientifically naïve sense, what we think we see, artists, and this is especially true of Chardin, began to try to paint what they perceived (the sensations of the eye and brain in response to visual stimuli). Chardin's fruit are not composed of a single color shaded from light to dark, but rather a variety of colors, used not only to give texture and reflect light, but also to model form. Nor does he treat his composition with the



uniform level of distinctness. While the objects like the fruit and silver vase are highlighted, the table and background are remarkably indistinct in shape and depth.

The still life genre now gave artists the opportunity to concentrate on the art of painting rather than on painting's objects, on how illusions are made, rather than on the importance of an apple or a bottle. This new element in still life is perhaps most strongly reflected in the paintings



Ills. #5.13, Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Eggplants*, c. 1893-94 (n detail), oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

of the French artist Paul Cézanne. In pictures like *Still Life with Eggplants and Fruit* (ills. #5.14), Cézanne explores the shallow spaces of still life painting in a radically new way. Instead of seeing the space of the painting as statically fixed, as Cézanne stood at his easel studying his arrangement of fabrics, fruits, furniture and jars, he'd shift his gaze slightly from one position to another. He would then paint that section of the still life according to that subtly different view and would make no effort to 'correct' the perspective by what he knew, rather than by what he saw. The table, whose edge can be seen at the extreme left of the painting, is viewed from a lower angle on that side of the



picture compared with the right side. There, although obscured by fabric, the front edge of the table appears well below the edge on the left, so that the table top on the right appears to be tilting forward. The more one studies this picture the more one realizes how Cézanne uses shifting perspectives throughout. What seems initially very stable and very carefully ordered becomes a chaos of shifting planes and changing perspectives. Notice how the eggplants appear draped over a forked armature that apparently leans against the back wall of the room. Yet on the left, the space of the room retreats further back, where another table stands. Are the eggplants in front of or beside or behind this rear table? How does one explain the relative size of the eggplants compared to this rear table?



Not only did Cézanne challenge traditional ideas about how space should be represented—he abandoned the conventional shallow space of traditional still life painting—he boldly changed the way artists could use color to model form. In the detail of *Still Life with Eggplants and Fruit*, one observes how Cézanne does not model the volumes of his apples and other fruits through shading from light to dark in a single color (like the uniform green of an apple). Instead he uses color contrasts to create the illusion of volume. Cézanne knew that cool colors (blues, greens, violets) tend to recede visually. Conversely, warm colors (reds,



oranges, yellows) tend to advance. He uses white not so much to indicate a light reflection on the fruit, but that point in the object closest to the viewer. By working this way, Cézanne does not allow the painted color to adhere to the object in order to create light reflections and texture, the way Dutch artists did. Instead, Cézanne made the paint a separate property of the painting, to be looked at as much independent of the object as connected to it.

Cézanne's paintings exerted a profound influence over European artists working at the beginning of the 20th century. In an important way Cézanne's still lifes made it possible for younger artists like the Spaniard Pablo Picasso to challenge centuries-old ideas as to what a picture is and to open up new possibilities for what a picture could be. One sees this, for example, in Picasso's paper collages (*papiers collé*), which he first began to make in 1912. On a background of a printed



Ills. #5.15 Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*, 1912 charcoal, gouache, and pasted paper, 62.5 x 47 cm, The McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas

wallpaper pattern (see ills. #5.15), Picasso glued a bit of a newspaper, a black and a blue sheet of paper, and a corner of a page of sheet music. On another piece of paper Picasso drew in pencil a somewhat three-dimensional study of a wine glass. The sounding hole of the guitar is created by a negative space, a hole cut into both the blue paper and the wallpaper print. There is no doubt that this is a still life with a guitar, but it is assembled from disparate, non-traditional art materials, and instead of creating a single coherent

spatial illusion, it suggests spatial relationships without actually



showing any. Whereas in a 17th-century still life the viewer is expected to be a passive observer of the visual information that the artist painted into the still life, Picasso's collage forces the viewer to become an active reader, who must take the visual fragments Picasso provides and make something intelligible out of them. Ironically, Picasso's collage shares the same shallow space of the earliest still lifes, but instead of being able to see this space, it must be inferred through comparing various elements of the collage with each other.

### Still life and the consciousness of 'things'

Before leaving still life we might consider how the genre can reflect our personal relationship toward things. Chardin most often chose to paint humble objects from the kitchen, and as discussed above, he drew attention to that subtle quality of things things as both made and handled by the human hand. In this way, these objects resonate as things—they



Ills. #5.16 Vincent van Gogh, *Shoes*, 1888, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 55.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

become much more than possessions. A century later, the great Post-Impressionist Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh throughout his career explored how objects could obtain meaning not symbolically but through human use. He expressed for example his relationship with his colleague and brief roommate Paul Gauguin by painting Gauguin's chair. Some of the



artist's most remarkable pictures are simply of shoes lying on a floor (ills. #5.17). In the work illustrated here, the artist clearly paints his own shoes, set on the tiled floor of his house in Arles where he lived in 1888 and which he shared briefly with Gauguin. The shoes are worn; they clearly reflect the wear and tear of an painter who continually went out into the fields to find the subjects for his landscape paintings. Van Gogh called his Arles house "The Yellow House," and he dreamed that it would be the site of a new artist's colony in the south of France. In van Gogh's mind, the house became itself a kind of work of art, to be decorated with a series of sunflower paintings. In other words, all these objects in van Gogh's world had intense meaning for the artist, as aspects of his artistic ambitions, of his emotional state, and of his relations with the world at large. In van Gogh's art, still life objects become animate; they acquire an independent existence and agency.



Ills. #5.17 Tom Wesselmann, *Still Life #30*, 1963, oil, enamel and synthetic polymer paint on composition board with collage of printed advertisements, plastic flowers, refrigerator door, glazed and framed color reproduction, and stamped metal, 122 x 167.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, NY

In the modern world, where so many things with which we surround ourselves are mass produced and are often so disposable, we easily forget the qualities that lie behind hand-made things, the objects that so concerned Chardin and van Gogh. It is hardly surprising that the United States, the richest country in the world and the one that gave new meaning

to disposable, consumer culture, also gave rise in the 1960s to a group of artists known as Pop artists. In Tom Wesselman's work (ills. #5.17) traditional still life conventions compete with real things (the actual pink door of a refrigerator) and packaging, the photographs collaged onto a painted checkered tablecloth. Everything we see is mass-marketed except perhaps the witty inclusion of a Picasso cubist painting, although this too might be understood as just another reproduction. If van Gogh wished to remind us of the resonant power of things, Wesselman shows us how mass-produced things are drained of significance.



ills. #5.18 Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, synthetic polymer on thirty-two canvas, each 508 x 40.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, NY

Andy Warhol took Wesselmann's position even further in his famous exhibition in 1962 of a series of paintings, each presented as the label of all the different types of soup that the Campbell Soup company were marketing to the public at that time (ills. #5.18). The label and the painting are essentially identical, so that the painting is as mechanical as the thing—the packaging—it represents. Warhol gave the economic term 'inflation' a new cultural meaning. In economic inflation, rising prices means that the buying power of a currency grows less and less. Similarly, by offering us more soup cans than just one—which might have made the point just as well—Warhol creates a kind of visual inflation, where the more we have the less value it has. This doesn't mean that the paintings have no economic value—in fact, Warhol's paintings are as a rule very expensive. What it means is that our relationship to things is shown to be a victim of mass-reproduced culture. The more we have, the less we have.

Contemporary art has given us quite a few artists who have explored Warhol's world of inflationary devaluing of cultural and artistic traditions. However, contemporary artists have also turned to still life in an effort to try to re-sensitize ourselves to things and to the power inherent within them. For example, the first-generation American feminist artist, Judy Chicago, created with a team of artisans what she called *The Dinner Party*. Instead of painting objects on a table, Chicago set out a





Ills. #5.19 Judy Chicago (American, born 1939). *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 × 576 in. (1463 × 1463 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation, 2002.10.

© Judy Chicago

real triangular shaped table with a series of place settings. Each setting involved a ceramic plate and embroidery work and each celebrated a different woman, who heretofore had not received the attention they deserved consistent with their accomplishments as artists, poets, political figures, and so on. The collective activity of making these settings was itself a form of consciousness raising, of celebrating these women through the activity of making things in materials and imagery that Chicago thought of as being products of women's work and women's identity. Later feminists largely rejected the essentialist idea of an intrinsically feminine craft or feminine identity, but Chicago's work did meaningfully affect the way that many women saw themselves at that revolutionary moment in world history.

It may be that in the 21st century, still life has now found its home finally, not in painting, but in sculpture, since sculpture has increasingly drawn from the everyday world materials and objects and then reincorporated them as art. This trend probably began with Picasso and his collages, but it certainly was profoundly affected by his younger



ills. #5.20 Cornelia Parker, *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 1988-89, flattened silverware, suspended, installed at the Tate Modern, London, 2910, © Tate, London, 2010 and Cornelia Parker

contemporary, the French artist Marcel Duchamp, who created what he styled as 'readymades' (see the discussion of these in chapter 9), in which he took mass-produced objects from the outside world and used them, with little or no further manipulation, as art objects. Instead of painting things, Duchamp used things. This has led to a very rich tradition in contemporary sculpture. To take just one recent example, the British artist, Cornelia Parker, created a striking and mysterious installation, which she entitled *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (ills. #5.20), which of course is an ironic reference to the sum that Judas took to betray Christ. Only in this case, Parker's silver pieces are literally flattened silverware,



suspended by thin wire, just above the ground. The result is both beautiful and oddly moving. The silverware seem to suggest the wreck of some domestic dream of harmony and wealth. There is a violence to their crushed forms but also a kind of spiritual elevation that comes from these objects being literally lifted off the ground; they are flattened and at the same time elevated. As viewers we think about what these objects would originally have looked like, how much they weighed, their shape, who used them, etc. But as suspended, we are also asked to think about them in ways that the objects themselves could never have anticipated, as if they were weightless, like clouds hovering low on the horizon. Still life or landscape?

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## On genre imagery

### Genre scenes, class and gender

Genre scenes are depictions of people going about their everyday lives, engaged in common entertainments, like drinkers in a tavern and peasants at a dance, as well as in traditional forms of labor, such as a ploughman in his fields, a shepherd with his flock, or a mother with her children. Since they depict social behavior they often tell us a great deal about the societies from which they came. We can learn from them how people centuries ago amused themselves or how they dressed. Yet, as richly informative as genre imagery can be, we shouldn't consider them objective records of everyday life. Genre images do not necessarily show us how the world was, but rather how the artist and his client wanted the world to appear to be.

Social class as well as perceptions about class identity are essential elements of any genre image. The most obvious example is the fact that until the 19th century, most genre painters took peasants and servants as their subjects. Their buyers, however, were never peasants and servants, but members of the classes above them, the prosperous urban merchants who lived and traded in Europe's cities. An urban audience was often only nominally interested in the actual lives of peasants in the countryside; instead they projected on to the image of peasantry their own class-driven perceptions of that life, just as today urban dwellers tend to romanticize life on a farm. Genre images often make fun of rural life or conversely idealize the peasantry's existence or do both at once. As a rule, genre artists depict their subjects as different from the eventual owners of their work, but expressed as a comfortable, rather than uncomfortable, difference. And because genre imagery is always intended to decorate a domestic environment, it is designed to entertain, to give pleasure, and sometimes to instruct.

Genre imagery runs throughout the prints and paintings of the great 16th-century Antwerp artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Antwerp was the commercial capital of Europe and was an important center of artistic innovation, especially in the genres of landscape and genre imagery, to which Bruegel was a leading contributor. Bruegel's work often features peasant life; he depicted everything from peasant celebrations to various kinds of rural labor, such as sowing and harvesting fields and tending flocks (ills. #6.1). We know that Bruegel's original patrons were



primarily members of the Antwerp urban elite and that his work was later collected by the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II. Given Bruegel's peasant subject matter and his urban merchant and aristocratic audience, it is interesting to think about the appeal his particular way of presenting the peasantry had for those who purchased his pictures.



Ills. #6.1 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Harvesters*, 1565, oil on panel, 119 x 162 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Bruegel painted *The Harvesters* in 1565, as part of a suite of six paintings that celebrated the months of the year (two months represented by each picture), for a very wealthy Antwerp burgher. These pictures belong to a long tradition of calendar imagery, as in the Limbourg brothers' *Trés Riches Heures*, made nearly 150 years earlier (see ill. #1.11), which combined landscapes with scenes of daily life typical to the time of year. Bruegel painted his versions of the theme at a time when the extraordinary peace and prosperity that Antwerp had experienced for over a century was ending. There were abundant signs of the coming troubles on the horizon. Historians have noted that in the mid-1560s the



region experienced a series of bad harvests. Europe was in the midst of what is known as the 'little Ice Age', a period of long, severely cold winters, with heavy snows, and the freezing over of lakes and rivers. The combination of the two inevitably resulted in widespread famine.

Wheat is in abundance in *The Harvesters*. We see fields of wheat on the hill in the foreground and again on the distant hill in the middle ground. Bruegel doesn't ask us to consider why so much wheat was being grown and why so many peasants were required to bring in the harvest. But his merchant client would likely have known that over the prior two centuries the peasantry had lost to enclosure—when powerful landowners fenced off and claimed possession over what formerly had been considered community property—much of the common land of medieval Flanders, land peasants traditionally used to graze their livestock and to hunt for game. Limited to their small landholdings, the peasantry was unable to raise sufficient food to support their families. So they banded together to raise wheat to sell to urban markets. This dependency on a single cash crop made peasant farmers especially vulnerable to falling prices during abundant harvest years or poor harvests during times of drought. A bad summer harvest and the peasantry were likely to starve the following winter. Urban populations typically suffered even more in times of famine. Bruegel's painting, then would have been, symbolically at least, reassuring on a number of levels to an urban audience.

Until the 16th century, farmers grew food that provided for themselves and most often for their immediate landowners. Over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, urban markets replaced local markets and farmers (most often women) sold their produce in the market towns in exchange for money rather than as barter (we see this reality expressed in the market paintings of Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beueckelaer, and other 16th-century Flemish artists). In *The Harvesters* we see that the wheat harvest has been loaded on to wains to be taken to the port in the distance and from there would be transported by sea to city markets. These new economic conditions only reinforced the separation of the landowner from the landed peasantry and put the peasant at an ever more precarious financial position. We know that poverty began to spread during the 16th century and only increased over time.

In the medieval world European society consisted of basically three orders, those who worked (primarily the peasantry), those who fought (the knighthood or aristocracy), and those who prayed (the Church). By the 16th century those who worked had been become divided into observable social strata within the towns and between city and country dwellers. And whereas urban life featured continued change and dynamic social



interactions, the rural life of the peasant, for the urban viewer at least, was reassuringly constant, unvaried except by the cycle of the seasons.

In Flanders, urban merchants were likely to have replaced the rural nobility as objects of peasant resentment, since the peasantry had become dependent upon their urban markets. Perhaps rural life in 1565 did indeed seem to urban audiences as well ordered, as unchanging, and as bountiful as Bruegel portrays it in *The Harvesters*. Certainly, Bruegel treats his peasants as if they were somehow indivisible from the land they till, as much part of the natural landscape as the trees, mountains and valleys Bruegel paints. The artist acknowledges the heavy work of rural labor, but he also shows his peasants well fed (in his paintings peasants are consistently fat or wear such heavy garments so that they appear to be fat, and they are often eating). To tie the peasantry so wholly to the land they tilled would have offered a reassuring image of a natural, unchanging social order. Bruegel's portrayal of the peasant works against the fear of a peasantry in revolt, a fear that would not have been too far from the consciousness of urban elites and the aristocracy at any time during the 16th century. In the 14th century there was a peasant uprising in Flanders. More recently, hundreds of thousands of peasants rose against their feudal landlords in neighboring Germany between 1525-27. The peasant revolt was eventually suppressed, but the German Peasant War was indicative of latent unrest in the countryside caused by growing disparities between the rich and the poor, and between the cities and the country, which significantly increased over the course of the 15th and 16th centuries.

And arguably, for many urban dwellers, the peasant was something less than fully human. In another work by Bruegel (ills. #6.2) that has not survived, but which was often closely imitated by his sons and other Flemish artists, *The Visit to the Tenants*, we see a scene one also often encounters in 19th-century British novels. The landowner, or in the novels more often, the gentleman's daughter, makes the rounds of the humble cottages of their farm laborers. This literary trope signifies the proper care of the owners for those subservient to them and speaks to the virtue, moral conduct and general kindness of the novel's hero (or, again, more often, its heroine). What is missing from both the painting and the literary treatment of farm visits is the depth of the peasant's subservience. Peasants were essentially without choice when it came to their masters, there was no prospect of social mobility nor an ability to find a different job in a different location. They were wholly dependent on the land-management skills and the benevolence of their landowner.





Ills. #6.2 Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Visit to the Tenants*, c. 1597, oil on copper, 27 x 36 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

*The Visit to the Tenants* also makes a point of contrasting the fine clothes as well as the more elegant, refined features of the landowner and his wife to the rough physiognomies, clothing, and a certain level of crude living that belonged to the world of the peasant. The landowner's wife is expecting a child, her pregnancy emphasized by her gesture of taking a coin out of her purse to give the farmer's child. The discrete signaling of her pregnancy contrasts markedly to the abundant fertility of the peasant wife, with her three children. And interestingly, Bruegel chose to reverse the idea of the landowner taking from the peasant his tithe, as one sees in the paintings of tax collectors, and shows instead the owner and his wife giving to their peasants.

Although not directly referenced in either of Bruegel's pictures, there were other signs that the world Bruegel had grown up in would soon undergo revolutionary change. Religious unrest was on the rise. Protestantism had spread widely throughout northern Europe over the course of the 16th century, especially in the towns. A year after Bruegel completed his cycle of the seasons, in the summer of 1566 Protestant religious fervor



boiled over. An iconoclastic fever took hold of Protestant zealots, who sacked innumerable Flemish churches and monasteries. Holding them to be artifacts of Catholic idolatry, rioters pulled down their statues, broke their stain glass, and burned many of their religious objects, including paintings. In this one summer, a large portion of northern European medieval and Renaissance art was destroyed.

Religion also helped inspire growing political unrest in the area of modern day Belgium and the Netherlands. The local populations increasingly viewed the rule of Philip II of Catholic Spain over the region as oppressive. Within a few years of Bruegel's pictures, Flanders was engulfed in war, inaugurating what later became known as the Thirty Years War. Southern Flanders became a battlefield; cities were sacked, farms and fields looted or burned. By the end of the century Antwerp ceased to be primary center of northern European commerce. Most of the Protestant Flemish traders located in Antwerp had closed their businesses and moved northeast to the largely Protestant city of Amsterdam. At the war's end, the provinces that constitute modern day Netherlands succeeded in achieving political independence from Spain, splitting Flanders into the largely Protestant Dutch Republic and the largely Catholic and Spanish Flanders. Antwerp continued to be an important commercial and artistic center in the 17th century, but Amsterdam superseded Antwerp as the most important center of European global trade, and the Netherlands entered into its 'golden age' of political and economic power.

In sum, the positive images of peasant life Bruegel created in his many prints and paintings projected an image of a stable social order in the countryside and an idealization of peasant existence in a land of plenty. Class operates in similar ways in all forms of genre imagery. It is, for example, why the nobility and the upper middle class were comparatively infrequent subjects for genre scenes, because, of course, the rich and powerful do not normally think of themselves as common. In fact, aristocratic genre scenes enjoyed their chief popularity during the first half of the 16th century when genre imagery was still novel. Even then, artists depicted the wealthy and powerful only at leisure pursuits, such as hunting, playing chess, or making music. In the second half of the 16th century aristocratic genre imagery grew increasingly rare, because court art, which dominated the late 16th- and 17th-century cultures of Italy, France, Spain, and Britain, generally sought to enhance the prestige of the patron who commissioned the major works of art of the period. Aristocratic genre scenes subsequently were almost always confined to promoting the concepts of luxury, pleasure, and eroticism.



Genre scenes may idealize the everyday material conditions of a certain class, but they never elevate the class above their current station. The ruling elites preferred to move up the image ladder, to make themselves more dignified rather than less so, and paid artists to portray them in the guise of gods or goddesses, not as some average guy having a drink at a tavern, much less as someone who actually worked for a living!



Ills. #6.3 Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in his shop*, 1449, oil on panel, 98 x 85.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

For this reason, until the 19th century, the typical consumers of genre imagery were the urban middle class, who enjoyed seeing different aspects of their world reflected back at them via works of art. In fact, it might be argued that genre imagery in general primarily expresses middle-class social aspirations. A very early illustration of this point can be found in Petrus Christus' *A Goldsmith in his shop* (ills. #6.3) from 1449. The painting was once thought to depict St. Eligius, patron saint of goldsmiths, but is now believed to be either a portrait of a notable



Bruges goldsmith or a kind of advertisement for Bruges' goldsmith guild, in whose guild hall the painting may once have hung. Whatever its initial purpose, the painting depicts a wealthy couple visiting a goldsmith, who weighs the bride's wedding ring in his scales. A convex mirror reflects a couple standing outside the shop on a Bruges street. Christus depicts business as an orderly, sober and dignified activity, all points that would have met with approval by his merchant audience. He also subtly extols the values of the craftsman to a community. The distinctions of rank matter so little in this picture that the goldsmith remains seated while waiting on his wealthy clients. We can say then that the painting embodies class pride and reflects the rising economic and eventual political power—and consciousness of that power—of tradesmen.

Depictions of middle-class men at work continue to be produced until well into the 19th century, but with decreasing frequency. This decline mirrors significant social and economic changes occurring in Western Europe between the 16th and the 19th centuries, especially in areas like northern Flanders. As one grows more familiar with 17th and 18th-century genre scenes, one realizes that most of these images depict domestic interiors rather than places of business, and that in most of these images the only ones working are the maids. What might explain this preoccupation with the home depicted primarily as a place of leisure?

To answer this question, we might start with what economic historians describe as proto-industrialization or the rise of cottage industries. Cloth manufacturing is a good illustration of this development. As late as the 17th-century cloth production was primarily an urban venture, carried out in large workshops in the heart of cities like Bruges or Leiden. These were guild-dominated institutions, and they served to regulate who could trade as well as the quality of the cloth produced for trade. The Dutch artist Isaac van Swanenburg painted around 1595 a series of four large panels (see ill. #6.4) for the guild cloth hall of Leiden—the hall actually served both cloth merchants and beer brewers—depicting the various stages of cloth production, from the grading of the fleeces to their washing, card, spinning and weaving. In the paintings we see that male members of the guild evaluated the quality of shorn wool. Men also carried out the more laborious tasks, such as carding the wool, washing and felting the fiber. Men were also the weavers, but women spun the fiber into thread. And of course at the end, it was again male members of the cloth guild that evaluated the respective quality of the cloth produced. In the panel devoted to sheep shearing, we see that the work is still being carried out within the town, and the activities had little to do with particular families or a specific class of workers. But in every painting, men and women are shown working together.





Ills. #6.4 Isaac Claesz. van Swanenburg, *Spinning and Weaving the Wool*, c. 1595, oil on panel, Stedelijk Museum Lakenhal, Leiden

Over the course of the 17th century, urban cloth production gradually gave way to the 'put-out system', in which the raw fiber was usually given to farm families to card, spin, and weave into cloth in their extra time. Leiden, which had been the second-largest city in Holland early in the 17th century, gradually lost its cloth market to other competitors, and especially to France, where the industry was organized around cottage labor. When cloth production shifted from the town guilds to the countryside it released the urban merchant from the dual task of producing and marketing his wares, unlike, say, the goldsmith in Petrus Christus' painting. Trade rather than production became the focus of urban Dutch economic life. Only in the artisan industries does the shop remain the site of both production and sales, as in bakeries and jewelers. And interestingly, it is also only in representations of artisanal shops that we see images of women working alongside men or even in their absence.

As rural cottage manufacturing replaced the guild-dominated urban workshops, production of goods moved out of urban houses. The growing Dutch economic organization around trade led to business being conducted outside of the home, in offices, warehouses, and the recently established



Amsterdam stock exchange. The Dutch were the first great speculators in the rise and fall of commodity prices, making use of the recent innovation of the stock market to buy and sell shares in everything from coffee to tulips. The Dutch also create a global network of trade, possessing at the time the largest mercantile navy in the world. As a consequence, 17th-century Dutch art is replete with examples of its global trade through the insistent display of all manner of goods and wealth brought into the country from all over the world. And the place where these goods are displayed is almost always the home. In this way, the middle-class home became a showplace of social achievement for the upper middle classes. Because the paintings were also to be hung in same these domestic spaces, 17th-century Dutch genre imagery (and later art the Dutch genre painters inspired) predominately feature domesticity and the woman's role within that life rather than the new male workplaces outside the home. Middle-class identity and middle-class social aspirations were largely constructed, in art as in society, around family life.



Ills. #6.5 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman with a Lute*, c. 1662-64, oil on canvas, 51.4 x 45.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

We can therefore add gender to class as an important element of genre imagery as it evolved over the 17th and 18th centuries, precisely because middle-class identity became focused at that time on domesticity. Dutch art was the first to give expression to the increasing separation between the public space of the husband and the domestic space of the wife. In spite of, or perhaps even because of, the leisure opportunities available to prosperous middle-class Dutch women, Dutch genre painting indicates that women were increasingly be defined by their domestic roles as mothers and housekeepers. In Dutch painting women are often depicted without the presence of men, or men are clearly shown to be visitors to the domestic spaces these women inhabit. Dutch artists made much of the interior quality of the home as a shelter from the outside world and frequently contrasted the dark spaces of the interior with glimpses through windows and doors of the world outside. In many pictures by the great Dutch genre painter Johannes Vermeer, the world comes to these women, as it does in *Woman with a Lute* (ills. #6.5), only at a remove, in the form of a map and a view through a window. The woman herself seems to be almost barricaded or imprisoned by the furniture that surrounds her.

#### Moralizing genre

Genre imagery rarely was created on commission. In general, genre artists worked for the anonymous market, with little assurance that there would be someone to buy the works they made. So genre artists sought out images or themes that they believed would sell. One of the axioms of modern advertising is that sex sells. This is no doubt why so much genre imagery has at least some sexual references. On the other hand, genre artists could not risk offending the middle-class audience who were their primary consumers, so their imagery was rarely explicitly erotic, especially if we compare these pictures to many mythological images favored by the aristocracy (see as examples, ills. #3.8-#3.10). What genre artists so frequently offered was a titillating subject, but one which simultaneously worked to motivate the viewer to engage in proper moral behavior. Just as genre scenes reflected divisions in class and gender, they also mocked the follies of some and praised the good conduct of others. It is probably because genre imagery, like the other major genres, arose out of religious art, that so much genre work possesses this kind of moralizing; it was what gave purpose or justification to depictions of everyday life, especially its less than moral bits.

Genre scenes often warned against the seven cardinal sins, against prostitution and drink, against gambling and other such vices, by depicting them. Not surprisingly, a common subject for genre artists was the tavern, often inhabited by gamblers, cardsharps, and soldiers. And



because drinking was widely held to lead to greater corruption, genre artists represented brothels, which were often indistinguishable from taverns. Of course, because a tavern was typically a center of city and village social life, it is not always clear when artists' tavern scenes are preaching against the activities that might occur in such places, or simply celebrating them.



Ills. #6.6 Quentin Massys, *Ill-Matched Lovers*, c. 1520-25, oil on panel, 43.2 x 63 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

A less ambiguous subject related to prostitution or near prostitution was the depiction of 'ill-matched' couples, in which an old man embraces a young woman (although occasionally the ages are reversed), which was a particularly popular subject during the 16th century. In this version by the Antwerp artist Quentin Massys (ills. #6.6), a jester, or fool, receives from the man a bag of coin in payment for the attentions of the young woman (we can imagine they are in a tavern). These scenes are the moral inverse of the marital portraits discussed in chapter 2 that were also becoming increasingly popular during the 16th century. The attraction of the 'ill-matched couple' theme was that it was sexy and moralizing at the same time.

Genre artists also depicted scenes of proper moral behavior, whether in regard to the relations between men and women or the proper conduct of business. For urban merchants, money and taxes were always popular



subjects for such imagery (see the discussion in chapter 1 of Quentin Massys' *Two Tax Gatherers* [ills. #1.5]). In another painting by Massys (ills. #6.7), which appears to be modeled on Petrus Christus' *Goldsmith*, the husband's keeping of worldly accounts (he is measuring the weight, and hence of value, of his coins in a balance), is contrasted with his wife, who is turning the page of a prayer book, symbolic of keeping a spiritual account. That she looks up from her devotions to attend to her husband's business suggests that Massys was not denigrating business in this painting in favor of religion, but was saying that each has its place. Certainly Massys gives both husband and wife a dignity and sobriety that shows both in their best light. Massys also depicts marriage as a close partnership and a shared existence with no real distinction made between the home and the place of business. While later scenes with husbands and wives continue the theme of partnership, as we have already noted, considerable segregation develops in genre painting between the public life of business occupied by men and domestic life occupied by women and children.



Ills. #6.7 Quentin Massys, *The Money Lender and His Wife*, 1514, oil on panel, 70 x 67 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Countless variations of moralizing genre persist throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Given its popularity, an interesting question is how the owners of these pictures thought of them. Of course, the buyers would always have admired the visual qualities of these paintings, their use of light, color and expression to convey convincingly a moment in time. But did they feel the need to be reminded of proper moral conduct by their paintings? Jan Steen's painting of a "dissolute household" (ills. #6.8) depicts the opposite of Dutch virtues. The wife does not know how to manage her affairs. Wearing a dress of rich satin and a fur-lined shall and a dress of rich satin, she and her husband are evidently a couple of considerable means. Yet they have abused the advantages of their wealth through drinking (more wine is being pour into the wife's glass by her



Ills #6.8 Jan Steen, *The Dissolute Household*, c. 1663-64, oil on canvas, 108 x 90.2 cm,  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

maid) and gluttony (food is so abundant that the ham can be left negligently on a platter on the floor, where the cat can get at it). Their morality is equally in question: the wife steps on what surely must be the family Bible, while her leering husband keeps up an affair with the maid, holding hands behind the wife's back. The nurse is allowed to sleep at her duties, leaving the family's two children to run amok.

The audience is invited to laugh at a household so radically undone. But perhaps some husband purchased the painting with the moral intent to instruct his wife on the proper regulation of domestic life. Note too that the painting, like many Dutch still lifes, is filled with all the things the Dutch so admired and coveted. Haphazardly strewn about the room are several Chinese ceramics, silver plates, an expensive lute, and a backgammon set. Among the luncheon produce are the luxuries of fresh fruits from warm weather climates: lemons, grapes and pomegranates. In sum, Steen's painting offers his audience an interesting combination of the pleasures of wealth, which the Dutch enjoyed, and a warning about its proper appreciation or home economics. We might conclude that in many 17th-century genre scenes moral instruction may simply have been a pretext for enjoying images for reasons largely unrelated to proper conduct.

During the 18th century genres scenes evolved to accommodate new audiences. More often artists worked for anonymous markets rather than through commissions. This led artists to employ new artistic forms, new marketing techniques, and new institutions in order to reach an expanding middle class in a number of Western European nations, most notably Britain and France. The English painter and printmaker William Hogarth discovered that he could reach many more viewers (and make more money) by producing reasonably inexpensive prints, often after his own paintings, devoted to social mores of contemporary Britain.

Hogarth's prints, which were strongly narrative in character, paralleled developments in English literature. The origins of the English novel are usually traced to a succession of writers, beginning with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), followed by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) and *Clarissa* (1747-48), and reaching early maturity with Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749). Between the publication of Defoe's novels and Richardson's, Hogarth published his first great series, *A Harlot's Progress* in 1731, followed by *A Rake's Progress* in 1735. His most celebrated cycle is *Marriage à-la-Mode*, which appeared in 1743-45, right between Fielding's two great novels. As one can see just from the titles of these books, each novel traced the voyage of the lead character through important incidents in his or her life, describing and interpreting the hero or





#6.9 William Hogarth, Scene 1 from *Marriage à-la-mode*, 1743-45, engraving, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Auckland

Similarly, during these years Hogarth built his artistic reputation by producing narrative cycles of paintings and prints that followed a group of characters through a series of defining moments in their lives. Hogarth traced the almost always unhappy consequences of the various choices the characters in his images make. In *Marriage à-la-mode* (ills. #6.9) Hogarth traced the course of an unhappy marriage in six sheets, the first of which comments on arranged marriages—here the bride is being sold virtually for a pile of coins heaped on the table in front of the groom's father. The two dogs chained together in the lower right corner provides an unhappy commentary on the marriage state, which in Hogarth's suite, is already doomed to failure.



Hogarth's work, like that of his novelist contemporaries, took advantage of the growth of the middle classes. Increasing literacy and leisure time encouraged a larger percentage of the population to take up an appreciation for narrative art as well as novels. The new popular arts, like Hogarth's prints or small-scale porcelain sculpture, were cheap to make, could be mass produced and would cost comparatively little to buy, especially when compared to the traditional media of life-size marble sculptures and oil paintings. In a sense, Hogarth and his popular successors increasingly democratized art during the 18th century.

The upper classes, and here we should probably include the upper middle class, that is to say, individuals of considerable property and education, tended to look down on these new arrivals to culture, and to dismiss as commercial or insignificant the work that satisfied more popular tastes. Artists with high artistic ambitions continued to aspire to portraiture and to history painting and sculpture (see chapter seven). In this way, class now played a role not just in the kind of genre imagery being produced but it also at least partially defined who was looking at what. Hogarth, and such later English printmakers as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson, reached a much broader audience than the painters and sculptors of the British Royal Academy, providing not only moralizing narratives like Hogarth's *Marriage à-la-Mode*, but also satirical commentary on contemporary social mores and political events. Today, Hogarth, who had his feet in both worlds as a painter and printmaker, is still regarded as a major English artist. The strictly printmaking artists like Rowlandson, however, are rarely to be seen in modern art exhibitions and museums, or discussed in modern histories of art devoted to the 18th and 19th centuries. In other words, Rowlandson's very popularity and commercial approach kept him and other printmakers of his ilk largely out of the canon of important European artists.

A similar popularization of art occurs in France during the 18th century, but takes a different form than it does in Britain. In France a single institution, the Paris Salon, largely contained the struggle between an elite, elevated notion of art and a more popular one. The Salon was the exhibition venue of the French Academy, and began by the end of the 17th century to take a dominant role in the French art world. Because the Academy was devoted to raising the social status of artists, it attempted to insist on art's separation from commerce. This ideal could only be realized if artists were sufficiently patronized by the state and the aristocracy and need not sell their 'wares' to an unknown public. As with still life painting, academic artists tended to look down on genre imagery for its 'low' or comparatively insignificant subject matter. In practice, however, genre imagery, like landscapes and still



lives, enjoyed considerable public popularity in France, which meant that they could not be entirely excluded from the Salon exhibitions or even the privileged membership in the French Academy. The still life and genre painter Jean Siméon Chardin is a notable example of an artist who eventually became a member of the French Academy (albeit late in life) and whose works were much sought after by middle-class and aristocratic art collectors alike.



Ills. #6.10 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Kitchen Maid*, 1738, oil on canvas 46.2 x 37.5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The Salon was originally a biennial exhibition of art by academicians. Its exhibitions became a permanent fixture in French art only in 1736, two years before Chardin exhibited at the Salon *The Kitchen Maid* (ills. #6.10). Later, as the Salon became more popular, it would be held annually and non-members of the Academy were allowed to exhibit their work. The Salon was intended to help distance artists from the art market by providing a public place to show their work, but in the end, it created



a situation in which it was virtually the only place in France where artistic reputations could be made (or broken). As the Salon grew, its audience expanded, encouraging public conversations about art and leading to the development of professional art criticism in the newspapers and periodicals that flourished during this era. This was all part of what historians and sociologists call the “public sphere” in 18th century France, a space where people would gather freely to discuss issues of the day, from politics to science to religion to art, whether the discussion occurred in a coffee house or on a newspaper page.

Before the birth of the modern art museum, the Paris Salon was the first truly public art institution. It helped foster, whether by intention or not, the notion that art belonged to everyone (which is to say the full spectrum of the middle class, and not just to the rich and the powerful. By engendering public discussions about art, the Salon inevitably made artists conscious of how their works were being read by the public. Artists responded by attempting to adjust art audiences diverse in class, education, and political interests.



Ills. #6.11 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767, oil on canvas 82.9 x 66 cm, Wallace Collection, London

Genre imagery, perhaps inevitably, mirrored the divisions in French society, especially between the aristocracy and the increasingly powerful middle class, anxious to have greater share in the power as well as the economy of France. We see these divisions when we compare the style of art known as Rococo, featured in the work of the artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard, which appealed to strongly aristocratic tastes, to Chardin's work. Rococo painting featured flowery, richly colored



pictures in the Venetian tradition, usually depicting nymphs and nudes—classical and contemporary—cavorting in ideal glades and elegantly decorated boudoirs. It was an art saturated with erotic dalliances, offering a surplus of visual pleasure. In *The Swing* (ills. #6.11), a richly dressed young man, hiding in the shrubbery, spies upon an equally fashionable girl on a swing, and is rewarded by a peep up her dress. A sculpture of a cupid left and an unwitting older male guardian right who pulls on the swing are the other inhabitants of this generic pleasure garden. Fragonard's picture is untroubled by any moral purpose and does its best to express the hedonism of the leisure class.

While it is important to note that Fragonard and Chardin were friends, and that Chardin frequently shared the same audience with Fragonard, Chardin's paintings were sober in color, rarely erotic, praised virtue, and condemned laziness and similar transgressions of middle class codes of moral conduct. *The Return from the Market* possesses only an implicit narrative. In the foreground the maid strains to overhear a conversation between another younger maid and a man, whose hat is only just visible behind the door. In this way, the painting touches on social mores, and perhaps on the loves and aspirations of servants, but with great restraint and dignity. Virtue rather than sexuality is its central theme.

A later 18th-century genre artist, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, in *The Village Bride* (ills. #6.12), much more explicitly praised the moral values of domesticity, of simple labors and responsibilities. He sets his painting in a humble rural, but un-prosperous environment. The homely objects of this kitchen scene are matched by the predominant earth tones used in the composition, as if to suggest by the sobriety of color the probity of domestic lives properly lived. 18th-century genre painting of Greuze's type, as well as many of the genre pictures that followed in the next century, reflected the emerging values of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a widespread movement among European intellectuals that advocated the primacy of human reason, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and the importance of the individual. The Enlightenment defended freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and religious tolerance. Enlightenment intellectuals tended to espouse deistic religious views rather than traditional Christianity. They placed their faith in nature, or what they called natural laws, which were unchanging moral principles, and appealed to human reason to discover and to obey such natural laws. They believed in social progress and the responsibility of each generation to posterity. In an increasingly secular society, the question became, what is the basis of morality in the absence of religion? The most prevalent answer was the family. Middle-class family life became a kind



of model for the desired social, moral and political organization of society at large.



Ills. #6.12 Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Village Bride*, 1761, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 118.1 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Note that in *The Village Bride* the village priest is absent from the scene. Instead, marriage is celebrated as a contract made through legal documents, which embodies the rational operations of the state, and through emotional bonds, which define family life. The couple's parents have drawn up the dowry agreement at the table on the right. The young couple at center is united by discrete, but interlocking arms, while the bride's sister and mother make an emotional farewell. Their emotions nonetheless are held in check, balanced by the rational and moral behavior of the various participants in the scene. Finally, on the floor below the couple, the primary object of marriage is illustrated. A mother hen presides over her chicks, a reminder that the purpose of marriage is the begetting of children, and that a morally conducted marriage should be both fruitful and well managed.



### Later genre scenes

Throughout the 19th century, both at the most popular level and at the level of the most highbrow forms of art, moralizing narratives that explored class and gender relationships enjoyed wide popular appeal. Genre scenes continued to invite audiences to read them as much as to look at them for their aesthetic qualities and the kind of social commentary such images might engender. However, more sophisticated audiences in the 19th century did not demand the sort of moral instruction offered by earlier, 18th-century genre scenes. Artists could simply describe certain kinds of social relations without necessarily explicitly commenting on them, not telling the viewer what to think about what they are looking at, the way that Greuze did.

To illustrate how class and gender played out in later genre imagery we can turn to several images of working women that date from the 1880s. As a general principle, from the 18th century forward, women who worked belonged primarily to the labor class. The higher one's class standing the less likely the woman would work, except in the role of housekeeper and mother. Lower-class women, however, were integral contributors to 19th-century industrial production. As certain industries became increasingly mechanized following the Industrial Revolution of the early 19th century, women and children could be substituted for a male workforce because they could be paid significantly lower wages. Women and children laborers consequently came to dominate such industries as textile production. They were, however, largely invisible to middle-class observers and did not find their way into artistic representations. (Their invisibility was such that even the first labor laws protecting working women and children in regard to hours and minimum wages date only from the 1870s.) Women workers who were represented in art were mostly laundresses, maids, and similar service-related jobs. And of course significant numbers of women worked as prostitutes and prostitutes often moonlighted as artists' models, so that their presence was, at the very least, an underlying current in 19th-century art.

A place where women achieved particular dominance and visibility was in the field of women's fashions, as dressmakers, seamstresses, and milliners (hat makers). Fashion had long been a barometer not only of the taste of the customers who wore them, but also a gauge of their incomes. Audiences on the street and in the art gallery were finely attuned to subtle differences in dress, and could precisely guess the class standing of an individual by the clothes she wore.



Ills. #6.13 James Tissot, *The Shop Girl*, c. 1883-85, oil on canvas, 146.1 x 101.6 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

The French-born artist James Tissot made his reputation in London painting images of society women, not portraits per se, but social types engaged in a variety of leisure activities that one would expect of women of high fashion and leisure: going to balls, participating in picnics, boating parties, sightseeing, and visiting museums. A Tissot painting is as much about the dresses as the women who wear them (who are all conventionally pretty and conventionally a type of upper class young women). Tissot returned to France in the early 1880s

and embarked a series of paintings devoted to "The Parisian Woman" and in 1885 exhibited fifteen paintings under this title at a commercial gallery in Paris. *The Shop Girl* (ills. #6.13) is from this series.

It would be easy to mistake the young woman who gives the painting its title for someone who simply helps a client try on hats and takes their money at the point of sale. In fact, a milliner worker participated in a variety of ways in the designing, constructing, and trimming hats. However, in Tissot's painting the decisions have all been made. She stands, holding the shop door open for her customer. Tissot contrives his composition to make the viewer appear to take on the role of customer; the shop girl holds the door open for us, and stands ready with our packages in her hands. To the left we see one of the shop's worktables, heaped with ribbon and other fabrics with which to trim the hats and dresses. Through the window and open door there is a bustling Parisian boulevard. A man in a top hat stops to look into the window, but not at the garment





on display on the manikin, but at a shop girl, who returns his gaze, even as she puts a box away. This little vignette is a critical feature of the painting precisely because it reflects on who these shop girls were.

Millinery work was a potentially upwardly mobile trade in the sense that some women who began working in a shop might rise, through their creativity, skill, and business acumen, to extremely well-paid designers. It was also a trade in which women from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds might meet as customers people from social positions well above theirs. But it was a low-paying job, the work was usually seasonal, divided between a fall fashion season and another in the spring, so employees typically required other means of support. Not surprisingly, the trade featured young, unmarried women who still lived at home. By taking this job they might hope to work while preserving their class standing (if they came from the middle class) or to somehow climb above their class. Workingwomen in public occupations like these were in a precarious social position. They were unprotected by marriage and the confines of the middle-class home and subject to predatory males. The man gazing through the window might be a prospective husband for one of these young women. Or she might only represent a potential sexual object. Tissot does not say, but he does communicate an underlying sexual tension in this scene.



Ills. #6.14 Edgar Degas, *At the Milliner's*, 1882, pastel on paper laid on canvas, 69.2 x 69.2 cm., Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Our second millinery shop is by the French Impressionist artist Edgar Degas (ills. #6.14). His approach to the subject is more modern than Tissot's, because he eschews both implicit and explicit narratives in his scene. We simply see a woman, trying on a hat in front of a mirror, assisted by a shop girl



whose face is obscured by the mirror, holding a hat in each hand. The relationship now is strictly between two women, the object of their attention is aesthetic judgment—what constitutes the right hat. His model for the woman we believe to be his friend and fellow artist, the American painter Mary Cassatt. What is beginning to happen in Degas' work is the freeing of genre imagery from its long-lasting role of class and gender commentary and moralizing. The scene is represented not only without any kind of moral judgment, but also effectively with narrative purpose. Degas makes us believe that we just somehow accidentally stumbled upon this scene and that the women are wholly unconscious of our presence. In fact the women are here only for each other and we are but uninvited guests. The striking composition and the subtle contrasts of multiple shades of brown are the elements of the scene that most preoccupied the artist and most work upon our experience of the painting.

Degas' handling of genre, in its non-narrative, non-moralizing form, became the mode that dominated the representation of everyday life from the end of the 19th century to the present day. However, scenes of daily life largely disappeared from the traditional media of painting and printmaking and sculpture and moved instead into the domain of the new media of photography and later in the 20th century, television and video art. These media continued the democratic tendencies of Hogarth and his fellow printmakers far more effectively than artists in traditional media could, simply by putting the recording of everyday life into the hands of everyone. In the late 1880s the American inventor and entrepreneur George Eastman brought out the Brownie camera, with the expressed intention of allowing everyone to make photographs. Soon amateur photographers everywhere were recording events from their daily lives. At this point, the genre scene became fully common, everyday people recording everyday lives, its celebrations, gatherings, rituals, travels, and so on.

Of course, artists trained in the medium (understanding the more sophisticated aspects of camera technology, as well as lighting, composition, and so on) could make more compelling records of everyday life than most amateurs. This photograph (ills. #6.15) of a young working woman climbing the stairs to the El train in Chicago a few months before Pearl Harbor and America's participation in World War II is the work of a young photographer, John Vachon, who was employed by the government agency, the Farm Securities Administration, to document contemporary American life. It is a marvelous, yet mostly accidental portrait of a moment in time, an unexpected image of a woman glancing over her shoulder just above a sign featuring a Chinese restaurant. The photograph offers a kind of reality that no print or painting can give the viewer; we have a sense of visual immediacy, of presence, that makes this woman eternally





Ills #6.15 John Vachon, *Ascending steps of the El, Chicago*, July 1941, gelatin silver print, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

young, eternally looking over her shoulder, even though, in reality she is likely no longer living or is very elderly. In Vachon's photograph the world is ruled by chance, without any moral intentions or religious compass, without any observable purpose. The photograph does not tell us what to think about class or gender, but merely waits for the viewer to invest in the image whatever personal responses they may have.

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## Imagining history

Today, modern recording technologies have kept the past very close to the present. We can listen to music or watch films or look at photographs made by musicians, actors and photographers who may no longer be alive. Yet these recordings seem almost as current today as when they were first made. When recordings document important social and political events, like the civil rights protests led by Martin Luther King in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 (ills. 7.1), they act as powerful witnesses to these events. This photograph by the Associated Press photographer Bill Hudson of a student bystander being grabbed by a policeman while attacked by a police dog was published in The New York Times the day after the event. The photograph is credited with having changed much of the public attitude regarding the civil rights movement in America in the protesters' favor. Similarly the photographs and stories published in Facebook and transmitted by cell phone of events in North Africa and the Middle East



Ills. #7.1 Bill Hudson, Walter Gadsdenn attacked by police dogs during Birmingham civil rights campaign, May 1963, The New York Times Co.

helped fuel the uprisings against multiple authoritarian regimes in 2010-11.

Because we perceive images like these to be more or less faithful reproductions of things that actually happened, we believe in their reality. Such recordings, of course, can be faked, and more easily today than ever before. And these recordings also inevitably represent the perceptions and beliefs of those who make the records. Their immediacy, however, causes recordings to become part of the histories they document. Simply by being continually confronted by such imagery, modern audiences learn to judge the forgeries from the authentic records and to see the biases of the reporters and witnesses of events. It is a skill that it is imperative that society foster, especially today where images can be much more powerful than words.

Imagine, then, living in a society in which all events are recorded as second-hand representations, with the strong likelihood that the recorder was not even witness to what is being represented. For the most part, such representations were also costly to make, so imagine too possessing only visual memories of events paid for by the rich and the powerful, by the conquerors, rather than the conquered, rather than the poor and the weak. Instead of belonging to the modern world of civil debate, these recordings of history embody the interests of power; they were made to enhance the prestige of those who commissioned the commemoration. This is why older representations of history typically made heroes of the victors.

Representing the interests of his client, the French painter Jacques-Louis David portrayed Napoleon Bonaparte, the brilliant French military leader, on the road to conquest (ills. #7.2). Napoleon is depicted leading the French army over the Alps into Italy, just as Hannibal led the Carthaginian army against ancient Rome in 218 B.C. , or as Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, crossed the Alps in the year 773 in aid of Pope Adrian I and his war against Lombard invaders. The Romans eventually defeated Hannibal, but Charlemagne was victorious and was eventually proclaimed Emperor of the Romans in the year 800, the first such emperor in Western Europe since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire some 400 years earlier. David ties Napoleon's campaign to these great predecessors by depicting their names carved in the rock beneath Napoleon's own. David self-consciously fostered the idea of the great individual who stands far above ordinary humanity; he depicts Napoleon as someone completely and easily in command of himself and of the world. The winds of fortune blow Napoleon's cloak forward into Italy as the general points toward his destiny while effortlessly holding in check his rearing horse.



David's painting is an example of political propaganda, made to support his client's reputation in France (Napoleon would declare himself Emperor of France a few years later). It illustrates how artists used both symbolic and narrative elements to illuminate important historical events. This is not reality that David depicts, but is instead an argument about the reality of current political events, to which this painting itself made a contribution. It embodies Napoleon's rise from a lowly corporal in the post-revolutionary French army to supreme commander, and foretells his eventual coronation as Emperor, like Charlemagne before him.



Ills. #7.2 Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1801, oil on canvas, 259 x 221 cm, Musée national du Château de Malmaison

Images of rulers and their conquests belong to some of the oldest representations in human history. Furthermore, unlike such genres as landscape and still life, the desire to represent historical events, and to depict especially the power of the prince, was not lost during the Middle Ages. What changed during the Renaissance and after was the manner

in which these events were depicted, which reflect innovations in media (such as the development of oil painting on canvas), in spatial construction (linear perspective and landscape techniques), and most importantly, in how narratives were to be created in static media like painting and printmaking. Much as landscapes, still lifes and genre scenes were originally justified through the use of religious and moral symbolism, so too the development of historical narratives in post-medieval Western art came about through a close affiliation between the historical scene and allegorical elements. To represent historical events in art, allegory, conveyed through symbolic figures and actions, functioned to transcend the literal event in order to reflect on its moral and/or political significance.

The Renaissance humanists began the process through which our modern historical consciousness developed. In reviving antiquity, they clearly saw the differences between the ancient world and the Christian "Middle Ages" that lay between antiquity and their present. And the present became not just an expression of the 'now', but also became the 'modern', that is say, the current moment in history that can be compared with, can be contrasted to, past times. In the representation of history in art, a struggle ensues between the representation of real time—actual historical events that belonged to lived or recorded memories—and symbolic time—a kind of timelessness—that is the domain of religion and mythology. Those with power both desired to maintain it and to argue that their power was inevitable, that it was effectively predetermined. Religious and mythological symbolism convey in art the idea of the eternal and inevitable nature of whatever historical event they supplement. A struggle, therefore, between the depiction of real time and symbolic time engulfs art from the 15th century until at least the 18th century. History itself, as also historical imagery, only became modern when it fully shrugged off the mantle of symbolic time.

### History's subjects

The Renaissance desire to humanize the sacred led to the rise and refinement of religious narrative art, which was a way of imagining sacred history. By the beginning of the 16th century, Italian artists had mastered the ability to create not only three-dimensional, life-like scenes on a two-dimensional plane, they had learned how to convey, through composition, gesture and expression key features of a religious narrative, that made it easy for the viewer to imagine what came before and what would come after the scene depicted.

We see all these skills at work in Titian's great high altarpiece painting for Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice (ills. #7.3).



Titian was commissioned to convey that moment when the Virgin Mary at the end of her life, according to Church dogma, was lifted bodily into Heaven. Symbolically the story represents a confirmation of Christ's promise of Christian resurrection, and anticipates Mary's role as 'Queen of Heaven.' Titian literally embodies this mystical event. He shows Mary, rising from a circle of Christ's followers on a cloud, born to Heaven by little angels (putti). The semi-circle of followers in the lower portion of the painting is completed by the semi-circle of the clouds above, which underlines the illusion that Mary has just risen from the midst of the men below. Their astonishment and awe on beholding this miracle are expressed through dramatic gestures, which also help to unite the lower portion of the scene to the higher register. Titian managed to combine the ethereal miracle of Mary's assumption with an extraordinary physicality and lifelikeness. Even as Mary ascends to Heaven she has her feet firmly planted on the cloud, just as the putti literally push the cloud skyward, so that we are made to feel as if this vapor had substance and weight.



Ills. #7.3 Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-18, oil on canvas, 690 x 360 cm, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice

What was achieved in religious narratives like Titian's was then transferred to representations of secular history. Witness for example Paolo Veronese's depiction of *The Battle of Lepanto* (ills. #7.4). It was painted within a year of the naval battle for the church of St. Peter



Martyr on the Venetian island of Murano as an ex voto (thanksgiving) offering from a survivor of one of the most important naval conflicts in early modern European history. Although it is not one of Veronese's major

pictures, it aptly illustrates how lessons learned in religious art could be applied to a mainly secular purpose.



Ills. #7.4 Paolo Veronese, *The Battle of Lepanto*, c. 1572, oil on canvas, 169 x 137 cm, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

The Turkish fleet was pitted against the combined fleet of Venice and Spain (Venice claimed to be the principle participant). The Venetian victory marked the end of Ottoman Turkey's advances against the Venetian Republic for the next half century. Veronese no doubt used eyewitness accounts for the basic configuration

of the fighting galleys, but then dramatizes the event in such a way as to assume Venice's superiority and eventual victory. The winds of fortune blow in Venice's favor; over Venice's fleet sunlight bursts through the clouds. The Turkish fleet is shown in disarray beneath a dark and rainy sky. It is the sort of visual conceit still used by Hollywood films four hundred years later (see the way the director Peter Jackson used the rising sun in the climactic battle at Helm's Gate in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*). Above the battle, in a manner resembling Titian's *Annunciation*, we see an allegorical figure of Venice and that of St. Mark (accompanied by his symbol, a lion)—patron saint of Venice—pleading for the soul of the donor before the Virgin Mary, and St. Peter, who holds the keys to Heaven. A heavenly orchestra accompanies the event, while on the



right, the archangel Michael prepares to rain fiery arrows down on the Turkish fleet.

Veronese combines religion and civic patriotism to celebrate Venice's triumph over its Muslim adversaries. His transposition of religious messages into political ones is hardly surprising. Audiences accustomed to religious presentations like Titian's were naturally prepared to understand Veronese's combination of the natural and the ideal, of contemporary Venetians and allegorical figures. Venetian artists made important contributions to the development of historical imagery through their commemorations and aggrandizements of the city's power. Venice not the first city to turn to art to trumpet its achievements, but it was perhaps the first city to harness the Renaissance innovations of painting on canvas and the spatial and narrative achievements of artists like Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo on behalf of sustained civic political propaganda.



Ills. #7.5 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Lucretia*, 1532, tempera on panel, 37.5 x 24.5 cm, Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna

Renaissance humanism also contributed to the development of historical representations by reviving or making current incidents from ancient Greek and Roman history (and in these histories there is a blurring of real events and literary stories like those derived from Homer's account of the Trojan war). These antique literary sources provided rich material for artists. And yet, over the course of at least three centuries of post-medieval Western art artists chose surprisingly few stories to depict from the considerable body of classical history. The selection of antique subjects was as restricted as the



number of mythological subjects artists chose from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other classical literature.

Once a historical theme had been established as a subject for art, it was likely to be represented again and again by the same and other artists. For example, Renaissance artists and their successors often chose to paint an incident from the earliest years of Roman history, depicting the legendary figure of Lucretia. Her rape and subsequent suicide by the last king of Rome Tarquin, according to the Roman historian Livy, triggered an uprising that led to the overthrow of the monarchy and



Ills. #7.6 Andrea Mantegna, *The Vase Bearers*, no. 4 in *The Triumphs of Caesar*, painted before 1506, animal glue tempera and distemper on canvas, 266 x 278 cm, The Royal Collection, London



the establishment of the Roman Republic. Lucretia therefore embodied a political allegory: the fall from power of an abusive tyrant and the rise of a just republic. But she also represented the complex themes of sex, violence, and martyrdom, whose fascinations could be almost entirely separated from the political allegory. The German artist Lucas Cranach the Elder, for example, created a virtual industry of painted Lucretias (see ill. #7.5). He and his son produced at least twenty-five different versions of the Roman heroine. In these pictures, Lucretia is always shown with at least her breasts exposed and always with a knife pointed toward her naked flesh. Cranach justifies the titillation of the scene by the moral statement of her suicide. Yet the knife, which she will plunge into her body, has an unmistakable phallic character, so that the suicide is also a not so subtle reenactment of the original rape. In historical representations like these sexual fantasy, political morality, and humanist scholarship collide.

The production of multiple Lucretias by the Cranach workshop is indicative of how the artist was catering to an anonymous market. The Cranachs relied on the paintings' combination of sexuality, morality and historical significance to attract customers. As a rule, however, producers of historical imagery rarely possessed the kind of commercial autonomy the Cranach workshop displayed in their Lucretia paintings. Artists representing history much more commonly worked on commission, usually with a particular location and purpose in mind. For example, the 15th-century Italian artist Andrea Mantegna painted for the Duke of Mantua's palace a hugely influential series of history paintings (see ill. #7.6), which depicted two of the four triumphs held for Julius Caesar in Rome in 45 BCE. Julius Caesar was the last great figure of the Roman Republic. A triumph celebrated the victories of Rome's generals in major military campaigns; they were great processions in which noted captives and possessions of the defeated enemy, along with the general's troops, were paraded through the streets of Rome before the chariot of the general himself. Caesar's triumphs were reported to be among the most lavish in ancient Roman history. Mantegna's paintings illustrated the triumphs celebrating Caesar's victories over the Gauls in France and his re-conquest of Pontus in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

Mantegna's paintings, which were acquired by Charles I of England early in the 17th century and are now in the Royal Collection, were painted in the fragile medium of egg and glue tempera on canvas. So, like Leonardo da Vinci's famous Last Supper, over the centuries Mantegna's paintings have undergone considerable restoration and now represent only a shadow of their original appearance. But even now, the paintings possess a grandeur reflecting the power of Mantegna's imaginative recreation of the original

events. Each painting depicts the procession as a frieze, with the figures all lined up parallel and near to the picture plane, in imitation of the frieze narratives that Mantegna could study on the classical sculptured columns that still survived from ancient Rome. Mantegna also used a perspective trick to emphasize the grandeur of these events, placing the viewer's eye level at the feet of the men participating in the procession. More than any Renaissance artist before him, Mantegna attempted to emulate the antique. He also based his scenes on reports published by the ancient Roman writers Plutarch and Appian. Mantegna's portrayal of *The Vase Bearers* drew from Plutarch's description of the second day of Caesar's triumph, during which men 'brought silver bowls and goblets and cups, all disposed in such order as to make the best show, and all curious as well for their size and the solidity of their embossed work.' They were followed, according to Appian, by white oxen. Mantegna obviously adds much to this scene that his ancient sources did not describe. But perhaps the most important quality these works possess is his imaginative effort to recreate an event that had occurred more than 1500 years before. No doubt Mantegna intended that the grandeur of these images would also reflect on the prestige of the Duke in whose palace in Mantua these works originally hung. His contemporaries regarded the series as Mantegna's greatest work. The paintings' fame was further spread across Europe via engravings the artist's shop made of these works, as well as through later engraved copies. The historical imagination Mantegna displays in the *Triumphs of Caesar*, the desire to show the past as it was, represents a major contribution to the developing language of historical images.

Paintings like Mantegna's *Triumphs* and Veronese's *Battle of Lepanto* inspired court decoration for the next several centuries. For example, early in the 17th century, the dowager Queen of France, Marie de Medici, commissioned the Flemish artist, Peter Paul Rubens, to celebrate important scenes from her life to decorate a palace she was having built in Paris. This series, now housed together in the Louvre, combines actual events with fantasy, like Veronese's mixing of the real and the divine. The most often reproduced scene in the series is that of *The Debarkation of Marie de Medici at the Port of Marseille on November 3rd, 1600* (ills. #7.7). Marie de Medici's marriage to the French monarch Henri IV had important political and religious consequences. The daughter of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Marie brought both wealth and her Catholic faith to a country divided between Protestants and Catholics. Following the assassination of Henri IV in 1610, Marie de Medici allied France with Catholic Spain and sought to repress Protestantism in France. Her reign as regent during the childhood of her son, Louis XIII, was characterized by widespread





Ills. #7.7 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Debarcation of Marie de Medici at the Port of Marseille on November 3rd, 1600*, 1622-25, oil on canvas, 394.2 x 295.1 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

political unrest. When Louis ascended the throne, he exiled his mother from Paris. Eventually the monarch and his mother were reconciled. Nonetheless, Marie de Medici's erection of the Luxembourg Palace in Paris and her commissioning of the Rubens cycle to decorate it reflect the Queen Mother's continued political ambitions and her efforts to keep in the public mind her importance to France.

Rubens did his best for his client, making incidents from Marie de Medici's 'courtship' and marriage to Henri IV as grand as possible. In this scene, an allegorical representative of France greets Marie upon her arrival from Italy at the port of Marseille. No less than Neptune, God of the oceans, accompanied by a bevy of mermaids guides her ship safely into the harbor. In this series, Rubens is always having the viewer look up into the scene, much as Mantegna makes us look up from the feet of Caesar's cavalcade. It is a physical reminder of the elevated stature of



their respective subjects. In the *Debarkation*, even the gods are subordinate to the queen.

In striking contrast to the visual rhetoric of Rubens' Medici cycle, the court painter to the Spanish monarchy Diego Velázquez painted a few years later an equally political picture on behalf of his king, but with a very different effect. *The Surrender at Breda* (ills. #7.8) celebrated the conquest by the Spanish army of the Dutch town of Breda, located on the border between Catholic Flanders and the largely Protestant Netherlands, then in revolt against Spanish rule. The painting was part of a cycle of twelve large canvases painted by a number of artists devoted to Spanish victories under the reign of the monarch Philip IV. By the time Velázquez painted his contribution to the series, the general was no longer living and the town had reverted to Dutch control. Yet Velázquez had known the general personally and he very much admired the generous terms and the nobility of treatment the general had shown his conquered Dutch adversaries. So, although this is a state picture, made on behalf of the monarch, it also possesses a strongly personal expression by the artist.



Ills. #7.8 Diego Velázquez, *The Surrender at Breda*, 1634–35, oil on canvas, 307 x 370 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Velázquez' painting departs from Rubens' cycle for Marie de Medici in a variety of ways. First there is the absence of allegorical figures. The artist attempts to give his scene a living reality, even though the events occurred years before. The painting also represents a combination of genres. It is a landscape, laid out in map-like form with the city and its environs shown as a panoramic vista in the background. In order for us to see it, the artist creates a slightly raised position for the spectator, so unlike Rubens' picture, we look slightly down into the scene; the effect is to humanize the event. As if to underscore the humanity of this event, Velázquez creates something like a group portrait, in the sense that numerous individuals' features are given portrait-like specificity. And of course, it is a history painting that attempts to promote a particular view of an event by focusing on a significant moment within the historical narrative: in this case, Velázquez chose the moment when the defeated Dutch general surrenders the keys of the city to the Spanish general, who then, reportedly, embraced his adversary. So, instead of depicting either the battle itself or the heroism of its participants, Velázquez portrayed the moment of reconciliation.

Velázquez does what might be expected of a court artist by putting the achievements of the Spanish army in the best possible light. But the painting introduces a new element into the representation of history, which is the personal viewpoint of the artist. Velázquez' personal admiration for the Spanish general and his humanitarian actions far outweighs the military and political significance of the conflict. This is a strikingly modern gesture, which as we will see, is repeated by later generations of artists who represent history not according to the client's dictates, but according to the artist's perception of the event. In this way, artists' representations of history turn away from representing state policy and become means of social criticism and public debate.

*The Surrender at Breda* is even more remarkable when we consider that the new art academies founded in Europe during the 17th century believed that historical scenes, being of noble subjects, should be conveyed in similarly noble form, either, as Rubens did, with the accompaniment of mythological figures or by placing the characters in the scene in classical dress. The chief model for academic artists' kind of history painting was the French painter, Nicolas Poussin, who was a younger contemporary of Velázquez. Poussin always chose as historical events subjects that belonged to ancient Roman history or to the Bible; stylistically he drew inspiration especially from the Vatican frescoes by Raphael. Poussin aspired to Raphael's clarity of design and emphasis on drawing and composition, as opposed to the rich color and painterly effects found in Venetian history painting. Poussin's *Death of Germanicus*



(ills. #.7.9) is a notable example of the artist's Raphael-inspired style. Germanicus was a great Roman military leader under the Emperor Tiberius and his adopted son. Germanicus, however, died under mysterious circumstances; he was perhaps even ordered poisoned by the Emperor, or by someone in Tiberius' inner circle. Poussin painted the dying Germanicus surrounded by his soldiers and his family. His son, Caligula, likely the standing nude boy depicted on the lower right, followed Tiberius to the throne to become one of Rome's most notorious emperors.



Ills. #7.9 Nicolas Poussin, *The Death of Germanicus*, 1627-28, oil on canvas, 148 x 198.1 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Art

Poussin attempts to recreate a first century Roman interior, and to recreate the clothes and armor that one could see represented in antique Roman carvings that survived from the period. The grief of Germanicus' family and soldiers is both dramatic and restrained. Their emotions are conveyed through clear and strongly contrasting gestures and posture. And the figures are densely clustered on a single plane (with the architecture opening up behind them) recalling the format of antique relief sculptures that could still be seen in the ruins of ancient Rome and elsewhere. In this way Poussin, like Mantegna before him, strives for a more historically accurate presentation of history than earlier artists



typically attempted. But what is really new about his painting has to do with the fact that the artist painted themes he chose himself and that he sold his pictures to private art patrons rather than to monarchs and other heads of state. Poussin briefly held a position as court painter to the king of France but disliked the court intrigues so much that he preferred to paint for a quasi-anonymous market. His paintings, therefore, rarely share in the propagandistic elements found in artists who worked under state commissions. Perhaps this political independence is also what helped Poussin inspire later generations of artists, who could admire both his style and his freedom to depict historical scenes of his own choice.

### History and the public sphere

The growing market for portable works of art and the increasing autonomy of artists during the 18th century (meaning that fewer and fewer artists worked on commission) combined to produce historical representations that participated in the emerging values and culture of the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment *philosophes*, as the French writers Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, and others were called, took the critical methods and expectations of scientific thought as it had been applied to the physical sciences since Descartes and applied them to the emerging fields of the human sciences. Enlightenment intellectuals were committed to the idea of social progress, to the belief that succeeding generations can and must improve upon the mistakes and limitations of their ancestors. They believed in rationalism and the capacity of society to organize itself successfully on behalf of the common good; they were accordingly suspicious of organized religion and of any form of knowledge that rested on received ideas and on faith. In general, Enlightenment intellectuals subscribed to the idea that individuals should be self-aware, that they should learn to know who and what they are, but also to understand those social forces that shape their identity, and that this self-knowledge and this critical attitude toward the social world should enable the transcendence of personal and social limitations in order to create a better common future.

Historical representations over the course of the 18th century increasingly were designed to arouse and to guide moral and political conduct, rather than simply to reflect the authority of the state or ruler. Meeting in coffee houses, at the exhibitions of the Paris Salon, and other public places, a growing urban middle classes debated the political and social issues of the day, contributing to the 'public sphere', which I have already invoked in reference to 18th-century genre imagery. The public sphere is not a physical place; instead it is a



metaphor for a civic life that exists independent of the state, while transcending smaller communities of individuals, families, or corporate entities. The public sphere is where people with different political, economic, and religious outlooks, different values and perspectives, meet to consider what would best serve society's interests as a whole. Artists who created historical imagery, like those who made genre scenes in the 18th century, played an important role within this public sphere. Historical imagery reflected the political and economic aspirations of this emerging urban class and provided a focus for public conversation on social and political values.



Ills. #7.10 Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770-71, oil on canvas, 151 x 213 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

A common subject of 18th-century historical imagery was the representation of heroic sacrifice, in which the individual gives up even one's life for the common good. We see this in one of the most influential history paintings of the century, created by the American-born artist Benjamin West, who interpreted recent historical events in North America for an English audience. *The Death of General Wolfe* (ills. #7.10) recorded the British conquest of Quebec during the French and Indian Wars, an event that occurred a little over a decade before West painted it.



General Wolfe's victory over the French general Montcalm and his taking of Quebec signaled the eventual defeat of the French in North America and the integration of Canada into the developing British Empire. The painting is a near contemporary portrayal of an important moment in the struggle between France and Britain for dominance in the New World, but for its audience it was hardly recent news. What was new was the way West represented the scene. The British academic artist Joshua Reynolds advised West to place his characters in classical dress and King George III refused to purchase the painting following its exhibition on the grounds that contemporary dress was not suitable for the noble theme depicted. Despite these reservations, West's painting was widely influential because of its combination of personal tragedy, self-sacrifice, and national triumph placed in the context of contemporary events.

At the bottom center of West's picture General Wolfe lies dying on the battlefield; his officers contemplate his sacrifice while a messenger, seen on the far left, carries news of the city's surrender to the general. In the foreground a Native American scout, playing here the role of noble savage, contemplates the noble sacrifice of the British general. The painting not only celebrates sacrifice; by placing the actors in contemporary dress, West shifts history painting from representing subjects common to all Western nations (the Bible and classical antiquity) and now expresses a strongly nationalist theme. From this point forward, artists imagined history increasingly as expressions not of the monarchy nor on behalf of universal values, but according to the national aspirations of the artist and his audience.

In the same year that West was working in London on *The Death of General Wolfe* an incident occurred in Boston that would have a profound impact on world history, an event documented by a cheap print published by the American silversmith and future revolutionary, Paul Revere. A regiment of British troops fired on a group of American colonials who were protesting the British military presence in Boston, a presence required to enforce unpopular tax laws handed down by the British crown. The American Revolution, which the Boston Massacre foreshadows was itself shaped by the Enlightenment. Thomas Jefferson, who mostly authored the American Declaration of Independence, articulated in the Declaration's preamble many of the central themes and aspirations of the Enlightenment as when he argued that human beings had 'unalienable' natural rights, including justice, freedom, the right to self-determination, and to the pursuit of happiness.

Revere had no intention to make an important work of art; he wanted simply to report on contemporary political events and to show the citizens



Ills. #7.11 Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a party of the 29th Regt.*, 1770, hand-colored engraving, 33.4 x 25.8 cm, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



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Enlightenment values and the public sphere are also both very much in play in the making and subsequent reception of Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Oath of the Horatii* (ills. #7.12), which was shown in the Paris Salon in 1784. On the surface, David's Oath might appear to extol only the most conservative values. The painting was officially commissioned; its subject, unlike that of West's, belongs to classical antiquity, taken from an incident from early Republican Rome, recounted by the ancient Roman historian Livy; its apparent message seemingly was the loyalty and duty



ills. #7.12 Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, oil on canvas 330 x 425 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

individuals owe to the State; and David's manner of painting was deeply indebted to Poussin's paintings made more than a hundred years earlier. Not surprisingly, the king, Louis XVI, responded very favorably to David's picture. However, David painted the Oath only a few years after the successful end of the American Revolution, which was still very much on European minds as an expression of the right to self-determination and self-government; the event David depicted had nothing to do with



monarchies. The scene is that of three brothers of the Roman family Horatius who agree to fight a ritual duel against three members of the family Curiatius, to decide the war between Republican Rome and a nearby city. The call of duty, the swearing of the oath by their father on the swords of the three brothers, is made even more dramatic by the fact that one of the Horatii was engaged to the sister of one of the Curiatii. When shown publicly one might see David's painting, as the king undoubtedly saw it, as the expression of personal sacrifice and loyalty on behalf of the crown in a period of rising social discontent. But one could also view David's picture as an expression of the need of individuals to stand together and to make sacrifices on behalf of their country; this nationalist aspiration did not require supporting the monarchy. Conflicting perceptions like these could then be the subject of public discussion and debate at the Salon and in the coffee houses. In this way, David's *Oath* retrospectively now seems like a premonition of the French Revolution, which broke out five years after David exhibited his picture, and which led to the overthrow of the monarchy, and even to the execution of Louis XVI.

During the French Revolution David became a propagandist on behalf of the revolutionaries. He barely survived the political purges that characterized the Year of Terror in 1793, when many of the initial leaders of the Revolution as well as the aristocrats and the monarchy they deposed lost their lives to the guillotine. David was rehabilitated during the years after the revolutionary fervor had subsided and he resumed his key position in the French art world just in time to witness the rise of Napoleon to power. From revolutionary David now became the chief apologist for Napoleon's new dictatorial regime. Between 1800 and Napoleon's fall from power in 1814, French art mostly found expression in history paintings that portrayed incidents from Napoleon's battles and other events that put the self-proclaimed emperor in the best possible light. David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (ills. #2) belongs to the numerous paintings by David and numerous other artists that proclaimed Napoleon's greatness to the world, until his fall from power in 1814.

### Nationalism and the privatization of historical memory

With the coming of the 19th century historical imagery grew ever more varied. First, this was because the intellectual discipline of history became increasingly sophisticated and employed emerging techniques ranging from archaeology to economics as means to understand the past. Knowledge of the world, both past and present, radically accelerated, abetted too by faster modes of transportation and a host of new means by which to publish



information about the world. For example, the arrival of photography in 1839 eventually changed the way history was recorded. Second, the audience for such imagery became ever more diverse because of the success of the middle classes in sharing political power with the traditional ruling elites. In the 19th century, the lowest classes of Western societies began to demand participation in the political and economic ordering of their respective societies. Historical imagery had somehow to navigate these diverse political, economic, and cultural perceptions of present and past events. Perhaps this is why the moral and civic luster that historical imagery possessed in the heyday of the Enlightenment had largely dissipated. In their place were works of art that supported nationalism (patriotic celebrations of national identity); works that represented the past as an object of historical curiosity and even entertainment (much the way that modern movies about historical events and personalities entertain us); and works that reflected the artist's personal and perhaps inevitably socially critical view of events.

Let's begin with nationalist imagery. Nationalism is a complex subject, so what follows is only a rough outline of its nature and its expression in art. Beginning in the 18th century in secularized societies, the nation state began to replace religion on the one hand and dynastic monarchies on the other as the idea that bound people to common purpose and created a sense of collective identity. The nation embodies continuity with the past (which is why nationalist art is so often absorbed with portraying various chapters in the history of a people) and it represents a collective aspiration for the future. Nationalism and nationalist imagery often focus on differences, defining a people by what they are not. In a sense, nationalism and nationalist imagery became possible because of the Age of Discovery that brought Europeans into close contact with many other cultures. What began as Christians versus heathens grew into the gradual awareness (if not necessarily the acceptance) of the many forms of religion and social behavior that are to be found in the world. With cultural relativity came the political territorialization of the world, as the West began to carve up the rest of the world for its own advantage, under the pretense that it would remake the non-West in its own (presumed to be better) image. The last and perhaps most important ingredient in nationalism is language. In the pre-modern West, a single language, Latin, represented both faith (Catholicism) and knowledge. During the Renaissance an increasing share of creative literature was published in the local (vernacular) languages, but most other forms of knowledge continued to be written in Latin, to achieve the largest possible international audience for the work. The Reformation began to erode Latin's prominence. Martin Luther's



denunciation of Church practices was published in German. The Bible was quickly translated into multiple languages. As religion became vernacular so did language increasingly define the people who would constitute a nation. The French speak French, the Germans German, and so on. The scientific and scholarly communities, which often held themselves above national aspirations in favor of universal knowledge, were the last to abandon Latin, but there too by the end of the 19th century vernacular languages came to dominate.

Nationalist imagery therefore tends to focus on what is 'vernacular' in a country, its unique customs and history. While nationalist imagery can, at times, concentrate on an individual leader, such as Napoleon, or Stalin, or Mao, typically and much more powerfully, because they are more enduring, it promotes a people. Although nationalist imagery might implicitly acknowledge how diverse the population is that constitutes a 'people', it tends to collapse differences into large stereotypes in the name of national unity. The French, the British, the Americans are said to have national personalities.



Ills. #7.13 Anton von Werner, *In the Troops' Quarters Outside Paris*, 1894, oil on canvas, 120 x 158 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

Nationalist imagery comes in many forms. Here is just one example, a late-19th-century painting by the German artist, Anton von Werner, who was



a favorite painter of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the third and last 'Kaiser' or emperor of the new German Empire, founded in 1871 and abolished in the aftermath of the First World War in 1918. In the *Troops' Quarters Outside Paris* (ills. #7.13) is a recreation of a scene from the German occupation of eastern France in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. The war led to the humiliating defeat of the French and resulted in the collapse of the regime of Napoleon III and the creation of a new (3rd) republic in France. Victorious Prussia used its military success to leverage the unification of the various German states into a single empire under the Prussian monarchy. Werner painted his scene almost a quarter century after the war, yet anti-French sentiment still ran high in Germany, as did the reverse in France. So Werner's picture would have pleased nationalist sentiment in his country and, if they saw it, would have outraged French sensibilities.

What Werner does is to play subtly and not so subtly on national stereotyping. The painting isn't about important German military leaders, but features common soldiers, billeted in an elegant country estate, still decorated in the aristocratic Rococo style of 18th-century France. These are men of war fresh from the muddy battlefield. Yet they are sufficiently respectful of the property they occupy to underline their virtues even in victory. One sign of this respect is the soldier on the right who carefully lifts the glass lampshade of the oil lamp on the mantelpiece in order to light it. As the soldiers, one plays the piano while another sings. Although it is possible to imagine that the song is some rough soldier's tune, the sheet music on the piano and the attention of the servant woman and her daughter suggests it is more serious music, such as one of Franz Schubert's *Lieder*. This vignette makes the point that Germans have their own culture, and possess especially a rich musical heritage of which to be proud. Finally, the manliness of the victorious Germans contrasts with the implied 'femininity' of this Rococo interior. The implicit argument is that the Germans won the war because they were more 'manly', more virile, than the French, that the Germans represent a triumphal present, while the French, as figured in this 18th-century interior, belong to the past.

Works of art do not have to reference military conflicts or political history to be nationalistic. Obviously, a scene depicting the signing of the American Declaration of Independence is nationalistic, especially if the painting is displayed in a public edifice like the U. S. Congress building. But merely by painting a high mountain meadow in the Swiss Alps allows a Swiss artist to make a statement about his nation's identity and culture. A Swedish painter might depict a country dance, in which everyone is dressed in traditional costumes, or people sitting in a sauna,



to convey Swedish identity. A Spanish artist might choose a bullfight. Such metaphors for national identity could and are found for every nation. Modern media continues this tradition of finding in contemporary events some particular national characteristic to convey the identity of a place or a people to their audiences. And despite the fact that the contemporary art world is global in nature, drawing participants from every corner of the world, artists still find it useful to reference their national cultures in their art. One often finds something specifically Chinese about contemporary Chinese art, specifically French about contemporary French art, and so on.



Ills. #7.14 Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, 1834, oil on canvas, 246 x 297 cm, The National Gallery, London

The second arena of historical representation is when the past is evoked as an object of curiosity and potential entertainment. An important innovator in this type of historical representation was the early 19th century French painter Paul Delaroche. For his French audiences Delaroche often chose to paint scenes from British history, in which the British monarchy at least were not shown in the best of lights. One of Delaroche's most famous pictures is *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (ills. #7.14); it is the story of a young woman whose claim to the British throne, following the death of Henry VIII's 16-year-old son, Edward VI, was advanced by Protestants who feared what should happen to the



Protestant faith in England if the Catholic Mary (daughter of Henry VIII) should come to the throne. Lady Jane Grey ruled for only nine days before Mary's supporters overthrew her and Mary came to power and within a year Mary had her executed for high treason. Delaroche does not dwell on the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, but simply presents Lady Jane Grey as an innocent victim, caught up in forces beyond her control. Her maids collapse in tears on the left, while the blindfolded girl's head is guided gently to the block, as even the executioner gazes at the girl with apparent sympathy. What is perhaps most innovative about this and other historical pictures by Delaroche is the artist's effort to imagine what this 16th-century subject would have actually looked like. He offers his viewers an archeological recreation of mid-16th-century clothes and the Tower of London to give his scene the aura of authenticity. And because his interest is neither in the political or religious conflict that motivates this execution, Delaroche makes his illusion of the past become present into an object of sentimentality. He asks his audience to emotionally identify with the actors in the scene, to see history as something personal, carried out by individuals, rather than as the product of impersonal and abstract forces like economics or culture.

Joining these archeological, sentimental, and nationalist images of history were works of art that reflected individual rather than public interpretations of events. This change is most dramatically announced by the French artist Théodore Géricault's enormous canvas, *The Raft of the Medusa* (ills. #7.15). Painted only a few years after the collapse of Napoleon's Empire, Géricault portrays a sensational, but a minor incident from recent French history, the choice of which had a specific political intent, because the artist hoped to embarrass the current monarchy and government.

Géricault took his painting's subject from a shipwreck that had occurred three years before; a French frigate sank in the Indian Ocean due to the incompetency of its captain, who had received his commission through political influence rather than according to his naval abilities. The lifeboats were unable to hold all the passengers and crew and at least 147 people were placed on an improvised raft, which was almost immediately cut loose from the towing boat by the *Medusa's* captain. Left alone and adrift it was thirteen days before a passing ship rescued the fifteen survivors. They told horrific stories of privation, despair and even cannibalism. Géricault's painting opposes the despair of a father who holds his dead son in his arms on the bottom left of the painting, along with the bodies of the dead and the dying, to the hopeful men on the upper part of the raft, who had caught sight of the ship that will eventually rescue them and are frantically waving to attract its attention. With its





Ills. #7.15 Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819, oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

life size figures and stormy sea that seems almost to extend into the viewer's space, Géricault made physically and dramatically immediate the sufferings of these men. It is a history now however simply of common men. There are no heroes in this painting, merely victims and survivors. Géricault thoroughly researched his subject, so although the painting is a dramatic recreation of a three-year-old event, is also has the quality of a newspaper report. Ordinary people are elevated to public attention by disaster and trauma. Today we are completely familiar with such depictions because they form the bread and butter of television news, where yesterday's unknown becomes today's celebrity, simply by being caught up in events over which the individual had little or no control.

Over the course of the 19th century the historical image became increasingly archeological, with the artist trying to imagine the past as it once was; it became increasingly sentimental, in which the artist imagined the past in order to arouse the emotional sympathies of the audience; it became increasingly trivial, wherein the history represented now proceeded from the accidental course of events in which ordinary individuals are the leading participants rather than 'heroes'; and it



became increasingly personal, reflecting the viewpoint of the artist, which might or might not have corresponded to the viewpoint of the wider society. In art historical representations eventually ceased to represent the social and political aspirations of a nation, except in the form of criticism of the current situation. Entertainment largely substituted for politics in historical representations. This trend increased with the growing sophistication of the photography, followed by the invention of motion pictures in 1895, and video later in the 20th century. Visual reporting of historical events increasingly became the domain of the non-artist, the graphic equivalent of the newspaper reporter, who contributed prints using a variety of techniques to mass-reproduced magazines, newspapers and books. The media, as we now think of them, were entirely separated from art, except in the sense that history and contemporary news could still be used as subjects for entertainment. There are very few examples of important historical imagery made by artists after the last quarter of the 19th century and these late examples often reveal how far art had come from the Renaissance standards of historical representation. One might say, in fact, that historical imagery in art did not evolve into modern news reporting, but instead was absorbed by cinema in the form of fiction, where stories about the past are almost always presented as entertainment and only rather as edifying or ennobling.

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## On abstract art

One of the most ubiquitous forms of artistic expression this last century has been abstract, or more properly, non-objective, art. Some might consider abstract art to be a style rather than a genre in the sense of landscape or still life, because their subjects define each genre. A non-objective work doesn't have a subject in this sense. Yet one might also say that through constant use modern artists have made a "subject" out of abstraction, even though they use abstraction to express many more kinds of ideas and images than traditional genres attempt.



Ills. #8.1 Brice Marden. *Grove Group II*, 1972-73, oil and beeswax on canvas, 183 x 274.3 cm, private collection, fractional gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; © 2006 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

The word 'abstract' suggests a work of art with only minimal references to reality that has been somehow abstracted from reality. 'Non-objective' on the other hand suggests a work of art that lacks altogether a representational subject, as one sees in the painting by the American artist Brice Marden (ills. #8.1). A painted non-objective work is an

arrangement of colors, lines, and shapes; in sculpture it is an arrangement of materials, volumes and forms. Some works we call 'abstract' really do have their source in an observed reality; but mostly, when artists work abstractly they work without reference to the visible world; their images are developed instead from their imaginations and are expressed through various materials and signs that have no equivalent in everyday life. That's why we should think of such works as 'non-objective', having no reference to objects in the world at large.

When the abstract genre was new, audiences struggled to accept works in the genre as art. It is one reason why the first abstract artworks referenced natural reality, in order to argue that the works were simply new interpretations of reality, not a new way of imagining art. And in fact, the social permission for artists to work abstractly was not easily won even from within the art world; there was considerable resistance to abstraction until the 1950s. Today, among people with little knowledge of art, abstract works can appear to be jokes or simple, easily achieved affairs, and not really serious art. Paradoxically, because the battles for non-objective art were fought so long ago, few people who enjoy this kind of art reflect on why we consider non-representational objects to be art, and not, say, simply decorative pattern making.

Since the beginning of the Renaissance an underlying constant in Western art has been the definition of quality as the skillful imitation of reality. With abstract art this standard measure disappears. Since abstraction became common practice, what distinguishes good from bad art has lost its traditional external, authoritative measures; we are left to judge abstract works on their own terms (and upon our own sense of their value). It was a revolutionary change in the way people thought about art. Many today no doubt still struggle with the concept that it is the artist who creates the rules by which an artwork should be judged, rather than some constant external measures.

Because the traditional external qualitative measures were lacking, non-objective artists and their supporters initially sought to validate this art by arguing that abstraction was a necessary historical development in art. To work abstractly was regarded as a breakthrough, a destruction of the old order of art. And having broken through to non-objective art, it was not possible, they believed, to reverse course and work in a representational manner again. In other words, non-objective art was an expression of artistic progress. This belief reflected a narrowly linear conception of modern art, one that excluded all 20th-century art not concerned with abstraction. To work non-objectively was



held to be modern. Artists who made representational art were regarded as artistic reactionaries.

Now, in the 21st century, few people believe any longer in the historical inevitability of non-objective art. This is because over time working non-objectively became as much an artistic convention as painting landscapes or nudes. And as a society we no longer subscribe to such narrow ideas of cultural progress. So, as non-objective art became commonplace, the artists' need to justify working this way also gradually disappeared. Today, artists treat abstraction as a technique or a subject or both, but to work this way is a choice, not the expression of the inexorable march of art history. Abstraction became just another genre.

The early abstractionists—and those who admired their works—were driven to their absolutist claims about the historical development of art because of the artistic risks they took and the public derision they often faced.



Ills. #8.2 William Paxton, *Tea Leaves*, 1909, oil on canvas, 91.6 x 71.9 cm  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

Consider these two pictures, painted only years apart, one by a Frenchman, the other by an American. Henri Matisse's picture is not wholly non-objective, but in its emphasis on non-representational color and line the painting moves strongly in that direction. Conversely, William Paxton's picture represents the traditional standards for art as they were still being practiced in most European and American art schools early in the 20th century, the creation of a believable three-dimensional space, the skillful, lifelike treatment of the women, the overall unity of

color and form that people expected of good painting.

It is hard, really, to believe that two such diverse works were painted at almost the same moment. When we look at Matisse's painting, we struggle to concentrate on his subject—a pastoral landscape inhabited by



nudes, suggestively classical in posture—because of the impossibly multicolored glade they inhabit. Matisse aggressively asserts the independence of color and line from the expectations of pictorial naturalism. He wants us to see the painting as a painting and not to illu.



#8.3 Henri Matisse. *Le Bonheur de vivre* (The Joy of Life), 1905-1906, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 240.7 cm, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, ©2018 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

disguise the act of painting, as Paxton does, as if to show us merely a living scene drawn from contemporary life. Matisse's picture is a physical object with a decorated surface. Paxton treats painting as if it were still a 15th-century Flemish mirror image.

Of course to achieve his pictorial illusions, Paxton was as interested in the formal elements of his painting as Matisse; what is different is that Paxton subordinated the formal elements to the effective meaning of his genre scene: the aesthetic refinement of these women with their orientalizing tastes. Paxton effectively treats these women as decorative accessories, similar to the Chinese folding screen behind them or the lemons in a Chinese bowl, sitting on what is probably a Chinese table. They are not portraits; they are a type and a kind of fantasy that the artist has created. What keeps us from recognizing the purely decorative roles these women play are their lifelikeness and the three-dimensional space they inhabit.



Matisse, on the other hand, saw color and line as independent expressive, or decorative, elements. These formal elements don't disappear into the scene. This insistent and arbitrary use of line and color shocked Matisse's first audiences. In 1906, when Matisse submitted his picture to the *Indépendants*, a Paris exhibition society, the artist Paul Signac, the society's vice-president, who was also Matisse's friend, tried unsuccessfully to keep it out of the show. As Signac wrote to another friend "Matisse seems to have gone to the dogs. Upon a canvas of two and a half meters, he has surrounded some strange characters with a line as thick as your thumb. Then he has covered the whole thing with a flat, well-defined tint, which, however pure, seems disgusting. It evokes the multicolored shop fronts of the merchants of paint, varnishes, and household goods."



Ills. #8.4 Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1910, oil on canvas, 100.6 x 81.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Signac was neither the first nor the last to wonder what rules determine whether something is good art, or even art at all. The

situation became even more difficult when the works in question were barely recognizable as representations of the world. This is what happened a few years after Matisse showed *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, when a young Spaniard living in Paris, Pablo Picasso, developed a style of painting derogatorily called by others "Cubism," named for the suggestion that his pictures were composed of little cubes.

It might be challenging for someone unused to looking at cubist paintings to find the portrait of a woman promised by the title of Picasso's picture (ills. 8.4). His model appears to disintegrate before our eyes. Obviously Picasso did not see the woman this way. He had discovered instead a new way to make a painting, one which is unmistakably about the surface of the canvas, the physical strokes of paint out of which the painting is made, laid out in a grid pattern of horizontal and vertical lines that roughly parallel the outside edges of his picture. The multifaceted planes of lighter and darker colors appear to move back and forth in the depicted space with little regard to the model's actual physical contours. Picasso seems to meditate on how space can be both constructed and denied on the surface plane of his picture; where space seems to be created on one area of the canvas, it is immediately denied in another, immediately adjacent area, as if his painting were a piece of paper folded in accordion fashion, left to right and top to bottom.

Picasso, however, still wants his picture to hold on to reality, however tenuously, to have his picture be about something other than simply the way it is painted. He provides the viewer with clues as to the model's presence. Her head and body belong to the central, mostly lighter colored vertical axis of his picture. Her shoulders are about in the middle of the composition, where we can also see just to right of her body the sharp corner of the chair in which she sits. Above her shoulders on the left are long, curving parallel lines that define the sweep of her hair. These cues and the shallow space Picasso creates for his model prevent his painting from becoming wholly abstract. Picasso felt these cues to be necessary because he always believed that artists must represent something in their art, however much they transform what they depict. Other artists, however, looking at Picasso's cubist pictures, drew different conclusions. For them Picasso had opened the door to a new way of thinking about art, one wholly independent of representing the visible world.

We see this for example in the work of a Dutch artist who moved to Paris in 1912 and fell immediately under the sway of Picasso's cubism. Like Picasso, Piet Mondrian began by offering clues to things that exist in nature. Using the title as our guide we can begin to see in *Flowering*



*Apple Tree* (ills. #8.5) the trunk of a tree and its spreading branches in the curving black lines and to read the flowers of the tree as perhaps those areas of white ground adjacent to the large black lines. The predominantly green-brown of the tree Mondrian contrasts to the largely grey/white areas that occupy the four corners of his composition.

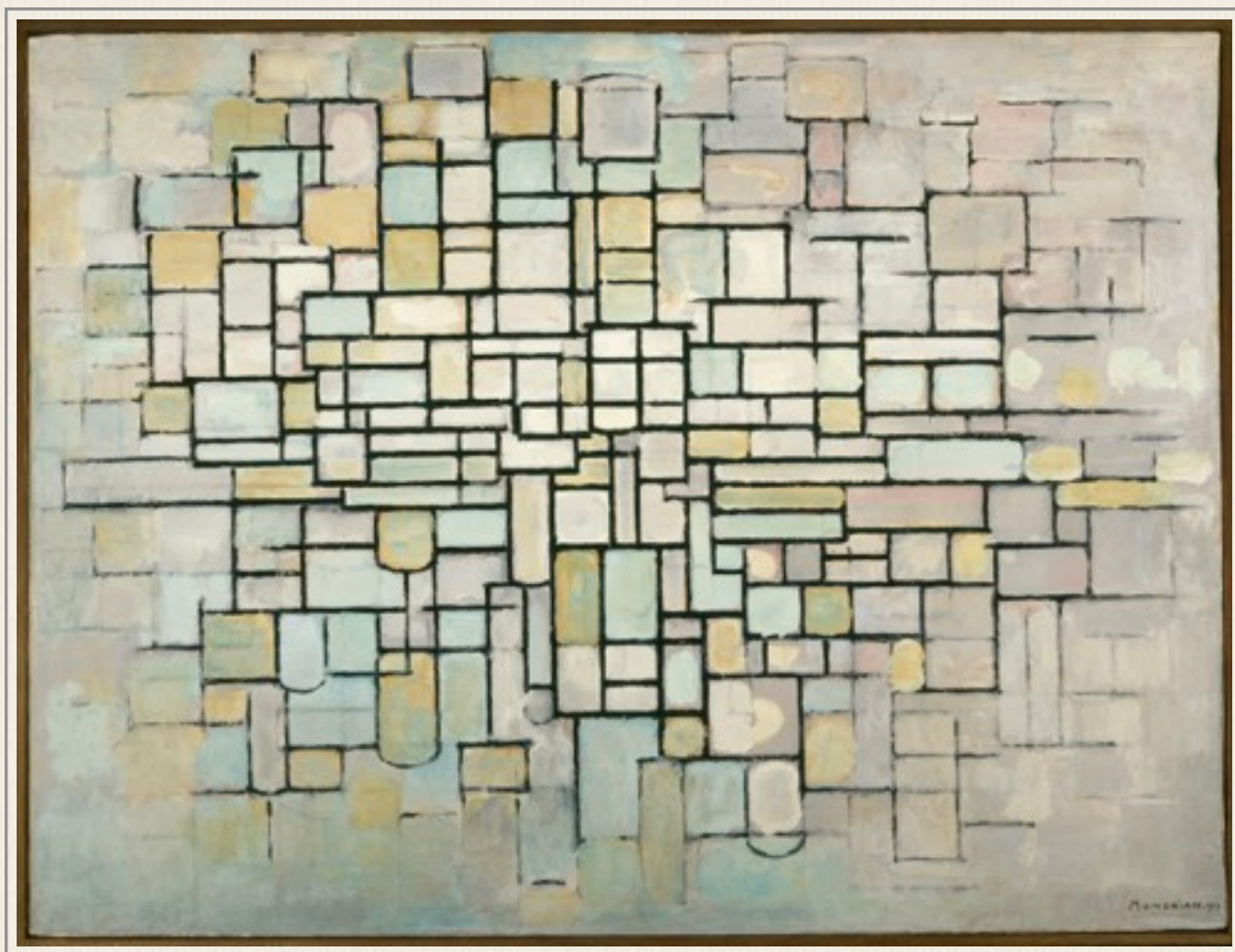


Ills. #8.5 Piet Mondrian, *Flowering Apple Tree*, 1912, oil on canvas, 78.5 x 107.5 cm, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

Within a year of his adoption of the cubist manner, Mondrian had largely freed himself of Picasso's reliance on representational cues; he allowed the colors and lines of his picture to work independently of external references (see ill. #8.6). One might still see a suggestion of a flowering tree in this later composition, but only if one knew that Mondrian had been painting trees in his earlier work. Now almost all the black lines in his picture closely parallel the external edges of his canvas; the effect is an overall grid pattern, something that became even more pronounced in Mondrian's later work. Here there are still a few curving lines, although these are no longer legible as organic forms; they simply serve to suggest a minimal amount of space in what has otherwise become a much more emphatically flattened composition than we saw in the *Flowering Apple Tree*.



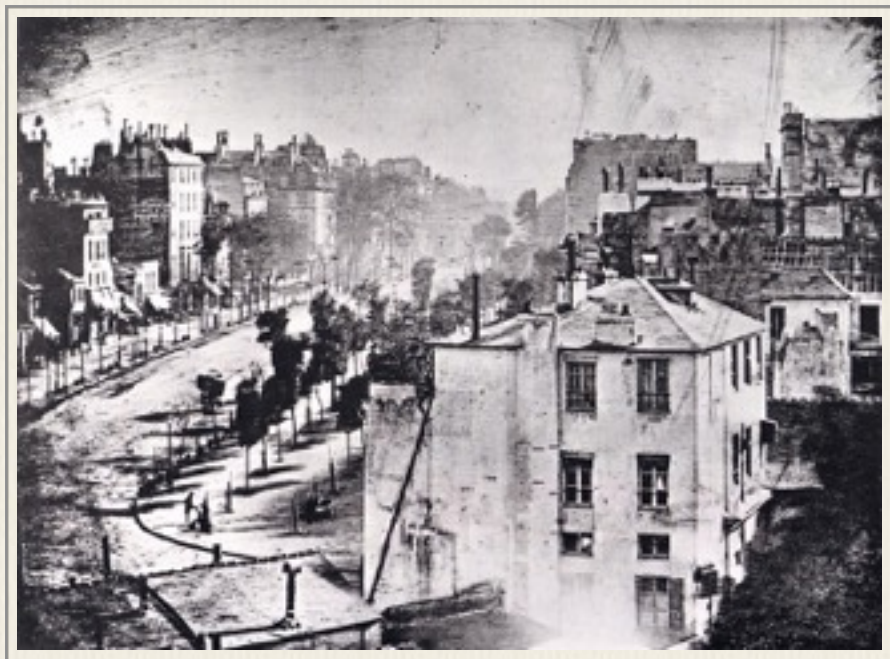
By this point, Mondrian had arrived at a type of painting that resembled the pattern-making that has always been integral to the decorative arts. Mondrian, however, was convinced that his picture was fundamentally different than, say, a quilt. Perhaps it is easy to see that Mondrian's painting is less predictable than a quilt's decorative pattern, that it is not really a pattern in the same sense as one finds in the decorative arts, because Mondrian's picture possesses irregular, subtle and visually complex relationships between shapes, lines and colors that could be understood as meaningful rather than simply mechanical (as in the repetitive labor of piecing together and stitching a quilt). In other words, Mondrian made subtle adjustments to his painting as he worked on it, based on his perceptions and his intuitive/emotional responses to the work already performed. Even when Mondrian's work became much simpler, when he reduced his pictures to three primary colors (red, blue and yellow), to black lines and a white ground, every line, every size of the rectangular objects, was subject to careful, intuitive alterations by the artist, who made many changes to his compositions as he worked on his pictures. Although Mondrian's paintings look like they were created using simple geometry, they were actually developed through a process of trial and error until the artist discovered what appeared to him to be the exactly right composition of line and color.



Ills. #8.6 Piet Mondrian, Composition no. II, 1913, oil on canvas, 88 x 115 cm,  
Kroeller-Mueller Museum, Otterlo



Besides the subtle relationships developed in Mondrian's paintings, the artist's work is distinguishable from decoration for other reasons, most notably that Mondrian's paintings are just that: paintings. In Western culture a painting is a special kind of object, one that had long been regarded as the most important medium for artistic expression. Even today, if one asked someone to name an important work of art, most would surely name a painting. In most art museums paintings are given pride of place in their collections; museums, especially major museums with very large collections, rarely show paintings alongside other media like prints or photographs, much less quilts. Those objects are all to be found in other rooms, even though they may be contemporary with the pictures in the painting galleries. Consequently, even a simple Mondrian composition of horizontal and vertical black lines and the three primary colors demands our attention in the way that purely decorative work never does.



Ills. #8.7 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. *The Boulevard du Temple, 8 o'clock in the morning*, ca. 1838, daguerreotype, 13,1 x 16,4 cm, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich

Ills. #8.8 Claude Monet, *The Boulevard des Capucines*, 1873, oil on canvas, 80.3 x 60.3 cm, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City



It is also important that Mondrian's abstract pictures 'solved' a problem immediately presented to the Dutch artist by Picasso's quasi-representational cubist pictures. Picasso's cubist pictures and Mondrian's abstractions belong to an artistic tradition that had explored the relationship between art as a representation of something and art as a physical object. The problem had been brewing at least since the first photographs were unveiled to the public in 1839. Photography's astonishing ability to capture a seemingly



unlimited amount of information about the world visible in front of the camera's lens exceeded even the most precise of painted representations of the world (see ill. #8.7). After photography, artists—beginning with the French realists, followed by the French Impressionists and Postimpressionists—turned increasingly to the syntax of art, the language and materials out of which images are made, as well as to their personal perceptual and emotional experiences of the world. In *The Boulevard des Capucines* (ill. #8.8), Claude Monet substituted strokes of black paint for the exact transcription of the men and women who stroll his Parisian boulevard. Impressionist pictures like these insistently play between the highly textured surface composed of strokes of color and the pictorial illusion they create when viewed from a certain distance. Picasso's cubist pictures are more easily understood in light of Impressionism. What Picasso did was to continue to represent something, but much more insistently than Monet's picture, he showed his painting to be a decorated surface. Mondrian simply went further. He gave up representation in favor of the painting's surface and the syntax of painting: line, color, and form.

Mondrian's relationship to Picasso's art and to the earlier French tradition out of which Picasso's cubism develops is another reason why it is that the first abstract or non-objective works were modeled after conventional artistic representations of the natural world. No matter how geometrically simple Mondrian's art later became, there is always the sense in which he remained a landscape artist, rooted in nature, even if he no longer painted its observable attributes.

Because of the widespread public derision which greeted the first non-objective paintings created just before the First World War, artists like Mondrian chose to explain in print what they were doing and why. In these treatises the artists appealed to their readers to consider non-objective painting as reflections of a higher, more fundamental form of reality than what can be seen with the naked eye. Mondrian, for example, maintained that his pictures illustrated underlying principles that structured reality. He believed that his pictures expressed a dynamic equilibrium between the rationality of the grid structure and his use of the three primary colors and the emotional decision-making process that determined how much of one color would be used compared to another, how big a rectangle or line should be, and so on. He subscribed, as so many early abstract artists did, to what might be called a doctrine of significant form, in which color and line are believed to communicate emotional states directly to the viewer without any other symbolic and representational mediation.



Once a few artists like Mondrian had 'broken through' to abstraction, many others joined in. As they did, however, they did not necessarily retain the justifications and habits of mind that informed the art of the first abstractionists. Over the course of the 20th century, in roughly this sequence, a series of what I will call modes rather than subgenres, characterized the development of non-objective art. I use 'mode' because the term indicates not the subject of an abstract work, but rather the underlying logic of the work, defined especially by that to which the work of art is made to refer. The first mode, practiced primarily by the first generation of abstractionists—although some artists continue to use it even today, we can call the 'natural' mode, because the images were declared to be abstracted forms of nature. This mode was largely replaced in the 1920s by the 'technological' mode. Slightly later, but still in the 1920s, another mode came to prominence, one which was believed to refer to the 'psychological' experience of the artist rather than to anything external to the artist. Technological and psychological abstractions dominated Western art until the 1960s when a new object-oriented mode, or 'minimalist' mode, generally replaced these earlier forms. Non-objective artists ceased to want their works to be viewed as metaphors for other things, like nature, technology or the psychology of the artist. Instead they wished their works to be appreciated just as objects. Lastly, in the wake of the minimalist mode, two other interlinked modes of abstraction have prevailed in recent decades, the 'photographic' and the 'digital' modes.

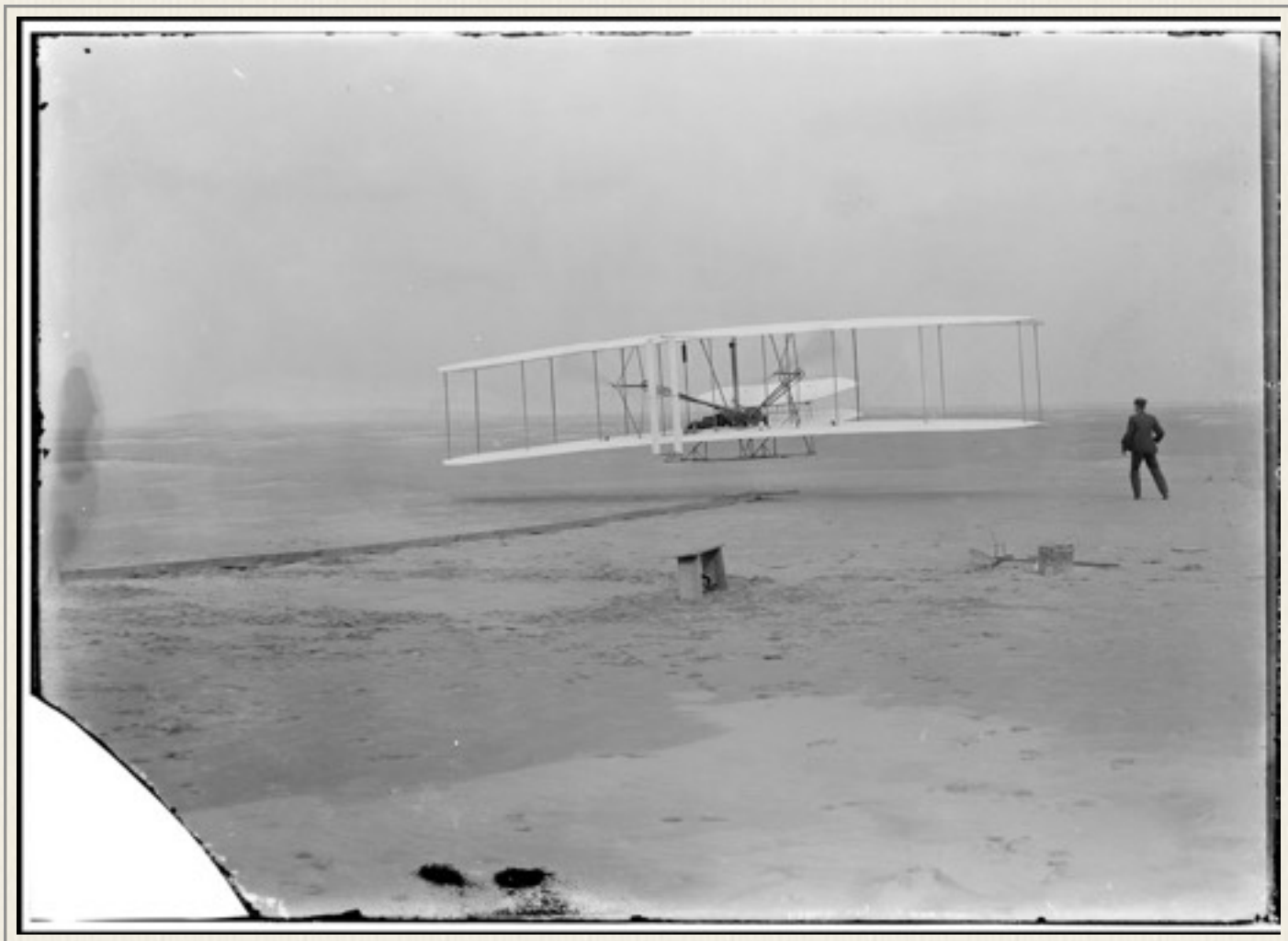
#### The natural mode

Mondrian claimed in his writings that his paintings expressed the underlying constants of reality, not simply the vast confusion of information conveyed by what is visible to the eye. It is why for many years Mondrian contented himself with using only the three primary colors and black and white and reduced the colored surface of his paintings to arrangements of lines and rectangular shapes. These were, for Mondrian, not only the building blocks of painting on which everything else was based, they expressed for him the hidden underlying order of the natural world. His art belonged to a growing cultural resistance by artists and intellectuals to the increasingly materialist attitudes of Western society, which was becoming ever more dominated by science and technology. Many advocated that art should be used to foster a spiritual revival. This was most influentially expressed in 1910 in the essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* written by another natural abstractionist painter, the Russian-born, German immigrant, Vasily Kandinsky. Like Mondrian, Kandinsky believed that art expressed the underlying relationships of human beings to reality in the form of spiritual vibrations. Non-

objective art would serve to reawaken the spiritual feelings in viewers who had become desensitized to such things in a world of global commerce and industry. We might say that the natural mode of abstraction was the most innocent and idealistic of all its permutations, born from the widespread optimism that preceded the First World War regarding humanity's ability to progress and to understand the world. Kandinsky and Mondrian's art, and their belief in what it was intended to convey, largely survived the enormous cataclysm of the war. But most artists who took up the language of abstraction embraced rather than eschewed the technological world.

#### The technological mode

It only took a few years following the 'break-through' into abstraction, for the model for abstract art for most abstractionists to



Ills. #8.9 Anonymous, The Wright Brothers First Flight, December, 17, 1903 at Kitty Hawk, NC, original glass plate negative (no. LC-W861-35/Lot 11512), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

ceased being nature but instead became the machine. Perhaps this was inevitable. The late 19th-early 20th centuries was a period of extraordinary scientific and technological innovation, perhaps the most rapid and most important period of such innovation in human history. The technologies of the new media were all invented in this period: the telephone, radio (and the necessary elements for television), cinema, and



even the foundations for modern computer technologies. Scientific advances in physics, the biological sciences, economics, and the humanistic disciplines were equally unrivaled and laid the basis for all we now know today. New modes of transportation were developed, most notably the automobile and the airplane (see ill. #8.9). And, tragically, new modes of warfare and new technologies of destruction were first deployed on the global battlefields of World War I. The machine came to express all that was modern about the 20th century.

The machine as model also expressed a new inorganic approach to art. We can look at Mondrian's *Composition no. II* and with little difficulty imagine it as a landscape. As a landscape the parts of his painting are structured to appear organically related to each other; they all harmoniously belong to a single image even if we can't recognize what is



Ills. #8.10 Kazimir Malevich, *Bureau and Room*, 1913, oil on canvas, 79.5 x 79.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

being depicted. To think about art inorganically is to break the natural relationships between things, to show shapes and colors in arbitrary, non-natural configurations, that are derived from the artist's imagination rather than modeled after the world. We see this for example in the work of Russian

artist, Kazimir Malevich, who within a year or two of Mondrian's first abstract pictures began to paint his distinctly different version of abstraction.

Malevich drew conclusions from Picasso's work quite different from those Mondrian had. Unlike Mondrian, Malevich took inspiration not only

from Picasso's cubist oil paintings; he was equally inspired by Picasso's collage works (see the chapter on collage). In *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Wine Glass* (see ill. #5.12) Picasso creates a table (the wallpaper) on which sit a guitar, a hand-drawn wineglass, a corner of a newspaper and a piece of sheet music. Note that even when Picasso composes still lifes out of pieces of paper, he still manages to make his materials correspond roughly to an observable still life; the bottle is beside the guitar, the newspaper below it; they are logically fixed in space about where we'd expect them to be, and are in approximate proportion to each other. Malevich, on the other hand, viewed the fragmentary bits of Picasso's collages as arbitrarily arrangeable units, to be put together in inorganic ways, unrelated to how we see the world. We see this, for example, in Malevich's *Bureau and Room*, 1913 (ill. #8.10), which, unlike Picasso's *Guitar, Sheet Music, and Wine Glass* or *Portrait of a Woman*, is not arranged according to natural unities. Malevich doesn't respect the natural order of a face and body expected from portraiture—one can make out the hair of a man, perhaps seated at the desk in the upper right of the painting. For the rest of his picture it is as if Malevich's 'man' had been merged into the desk described in the title. Flat planes of yellow, white, blue, and other colors replace the forms of the furniture. We look in vain for further clues indicating specific features of the room's objects and find instead non-representational geometric elements substituting for the natural forms.

Given how far Malevich departs from Picasso's cubism here, it is not surprising that Malevich also 'broke through' to abstraction the following year to develop a style he called "Suprematism." The term is triumphant in tone, reflecting Malevich's belief that thousands of years of artistic evolution had culminated in his painting, that he had developed absolutely the last word in art, had in fact achieved its ultimate form. In his Suprematist composition *Eight Red Rectangles* (ill. #8.11), Malevich abandoned conventional references to observable reality. In its place, the artist creates his own visual order, in which the rectangles appear to float on the flat, only subtly differentiated white ground. Looked at closely, the red rectangles mostly appear to have been painted on top of the white ground; however there are places where the white ground was painted over the red. The visual effect is to make these rectangles appear to sit both on top of the white ground and to cut into it. The red rectangles are not lined up parallel to each other and they are placed diagonally to the rectangular frame of the canvas edge. This creates the visual appearance of movement; the rectangles appear to move both toward and away from each other and, as if they were collectively in motion, to pivot from the painting's center clockwise around the picture plane. And





Ills. #8.11 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition (with Eight Red Rectangles)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 80 x 62 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

because the rectangles are each a different size and shape, they can also be read to be moving visually back and forth in space, with the larger rectangles perhaps appearing closer to the viewer and the smaller rectangles farther back. The white ground of the painting then visually and metaphorically suggests an infinite space in which and on which the red rectangles hover.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the aesthetic innovations of the pre-war abstractionists became the foundations for the utopian vistas of the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde. Under the general term "Constructivism" Russian artists used abstract form as a means to imagine the future communist society promised by the Bolshevik Revolution. Artists hoped to make their aesthetic innovations parallel the political innovations of the fledgling communist state. As the revolutionary hopes of the early 1920s faded and were replaced by an increasingly closed and totalitarian society, so Russian abstract art was replaced by what came to be known as Socialist Realism, an art designed to communicate the state's social and political agenda to the largest possible audiences. But for a brief interval, it was possible for the

Constructivists to imagine that non-objective art could be the means to imagine a coming technological paradise of the new classless society.

Constructivist ideas quickly spread to Western Europe and united with existing abstract aesthetic tendencies there. In the years prior to the Nazis' rise to power in Germany in 1933 Western European artists and architects sought to adapt the aesthetics of abstract art to the making of useful objects. They hoped to use non-objective art as a model for the development of industrial design. Many subscribed to the belief that these designs should not be ornamental, extraneous to the object, but should be purely expressions of the object's structure and materials. They also generally held that the simplest forms, like the abstract squares and lines of Mondrian and Malevich's paintings, were the most efficient designs. These simple designs would lend themselves most effectively to standardization and hence more likely to be mass reproduced.

Ills. #8.12 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Barcelona Love Seat*, designed in 1929, leather and polished chrome, contemporary reproduction

The Bauhaus in Germany (active 1919–1933) is the most famous example of an art school set up to teach students design principles at the hands of major non-objective artists like Mondrian, to be applied to mass reproducible objects and to the built environment. Bauhaus designers and other Western architects and artists were able to translate more effectively than their Russian contemporaries abstract designs into useable objects and buildings. A piece of furniture, such as the Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe's love seat (ills. #8.12) that he designed for an





architectural exhibition in 1929 resembles a three-dimension version of a Malevich painting. Significantly it derives its aesthetic elements directly from its structural requirements.

Here we are at perhaps the most important consequence of the rise of non-objective art. Ever since the Bauhaus we have come to think of design in all its myriad forms as the disposition of abstract elements, rather than the mastery of a set of stylistic vocabularies tied to representations of reality. It is through the Bauhaus' translation of non-objective art into practical design that the influence of abstraction has been more broadly felt and in this sense the Bauhaus is as influential today as it was fifty years ago. Everywhere we look, in our furniture, our packaging, our advertisements, our architecture, everywhere in the humanly designed environment we find the legacy of the abstractionists' way of thinking about art as syntax and form language. The difference is that all these other functions ostensibly have utilitarian value; they serve a functional purpose. In the visual arts, in painting and sculpture in particular, abstraction is explicitly non-utilitarian, the only purpose it serves are its own goals, which are overwhelmingly aesthetic in character.

#### The psychological mode

The natural abstractionists of the pre-World War I generation worked intuitively and emotionally in producing their art. The psychological dimension of their practice however was largely suppressed in the images they produced. In the 1920s a group of young artists, based in Paris and led by the poet and artistic entrepreneur André Breton, came to believe that art's primary purpose should be to free the imagination. They saw this as a parallel activity to communism's claim to free humanity from the tyranny of capitalism. Because this new consciousness expressed a higher vision of reality Breton called the new movement Surrealism. Under the influence of Sigmund Freud, the Surrealists sought techniques that would unlock the unconscious mind and that could then be applied to the making of both literary and visual art. A favored technique was found in the various forms of automatism through which at least a part of an artwork was created without the intervention of conscious thought or control, as in stream of consciousness writing.

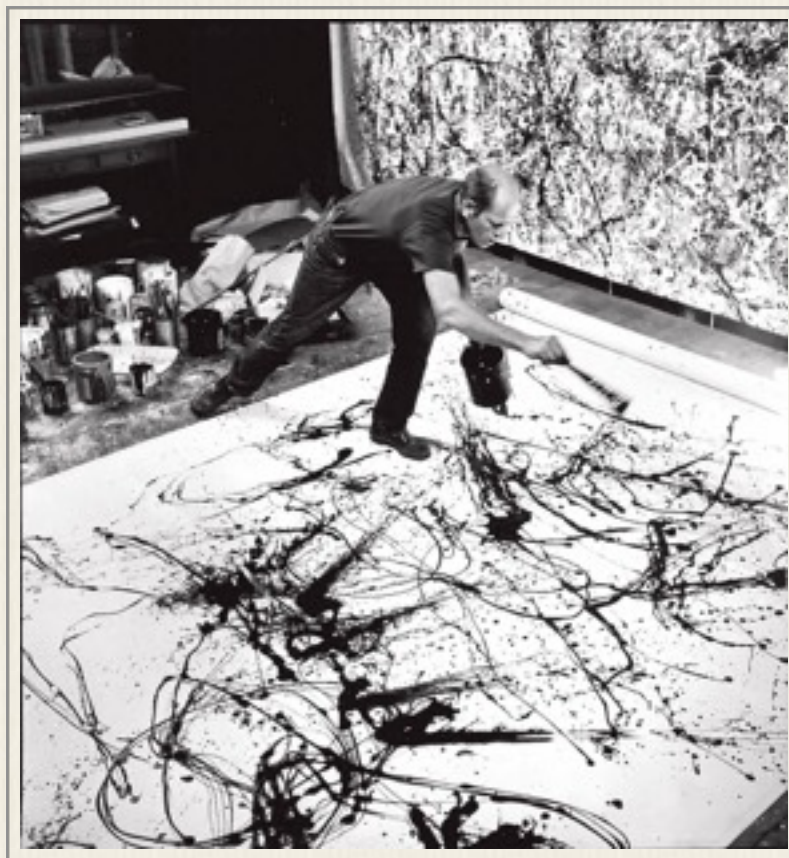
In the visual arts some artists began by making random marks on a surface using a variety of techniques. These marks would then suggest figures and/or symbols that the artists would subsequently develop as they worked up their image. The Surrealist idea is that such work gave free reign to the imagination. The French Surrealist André Masson began *Battle of Fishes* (ills. #8.13) by pouring gesso, a glue-like substance, onto a





Ills. #8.13 André Masson, *Battle of Fishes*, 1926, sand, gesso, oil, pencil, and charcoal on canvas, 36.2 x 73 cm, Museum of Modern Art, NY

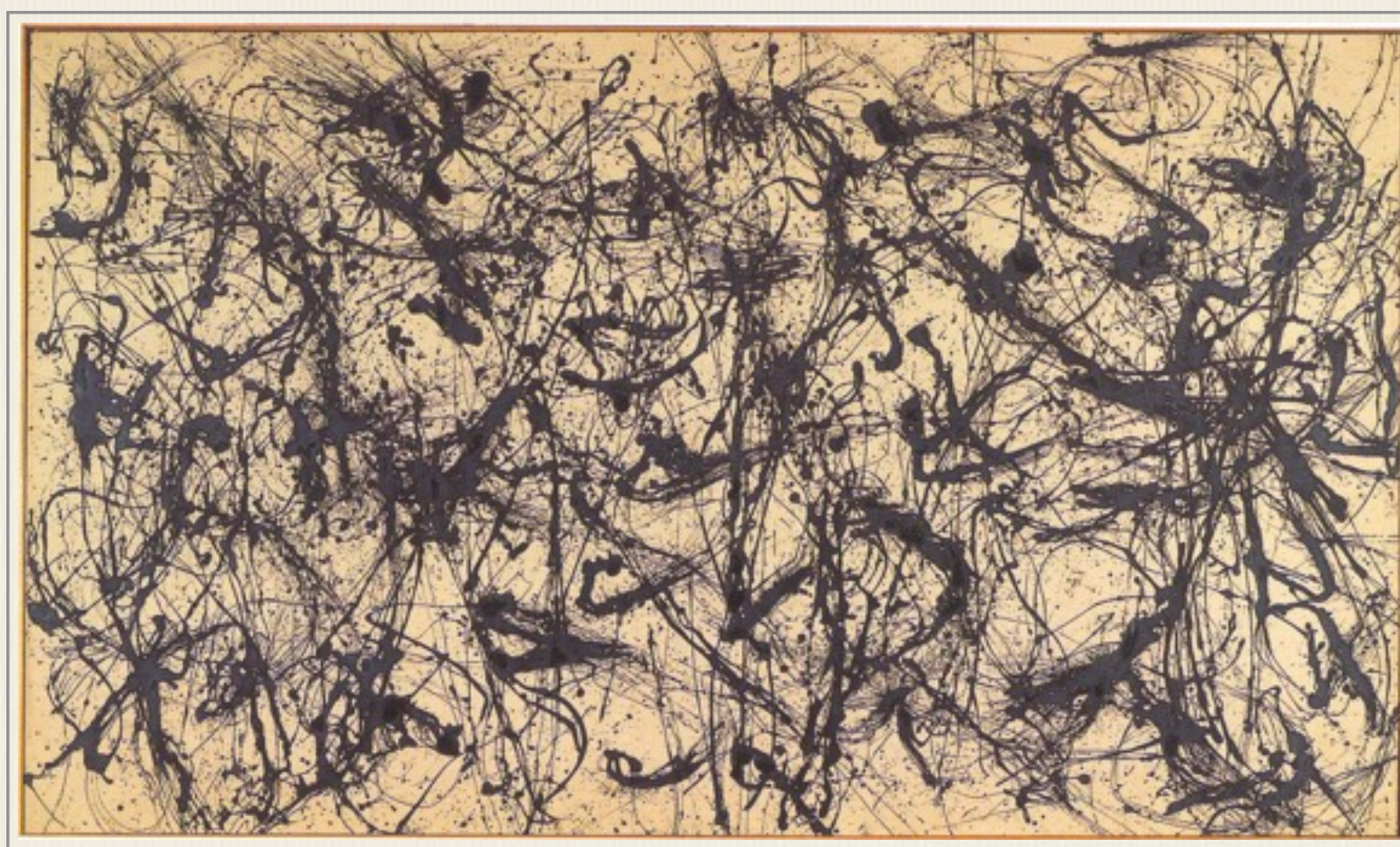
canvas, and then pouring sand over the gesso. He then made seemingly random marks in pencil and charcoal inspired by the chance arrangement of sand. Some of these images suggested to the artist fish-like creatures, for which he then created eyes and fins. The resulting imagery then presumably inspired the artist to give the painting its title.



Ills. #8.14 Hans Namuth, *Pollock painting in his studio*, 1950, gelatin silver print, 37.6 x 35.1 cm, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., gift of the Estate of Hans Namuth, © Hans Namuth Ltd.



During the 1940s a group of artists working in New York, who were later named “abstract expressionists”, took inspiration from the Surrealists’ example but further developed and radicalized their use of automatism. This is seen most especially in the work of Jackson Pollock. Pollock began—and ended—work on his paintings via a process of improvisation. Pollock often painted very large canvases (the Surrealists made only comparatively small paintings). He spread his canvas un-stretched on the floor of his studio and using a stick to guide the flow of paint rather than a brush, dripped and splattered the paint across its surface (see ill. #8.14). Often working very quickly and from all sides of his painting, Pollock responded to the random effects achieved by one series of drips and pours when adding additional layers of paint, modifying his composition within the limits his technique allowed. According to Pollock “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about.”



Ills. #8.15 Jackson Pollock, Number 32, 1950, enamel on canvas, 269 x 457.5 cm, Nordrhein-Westfalen Museum, Dusseldorf

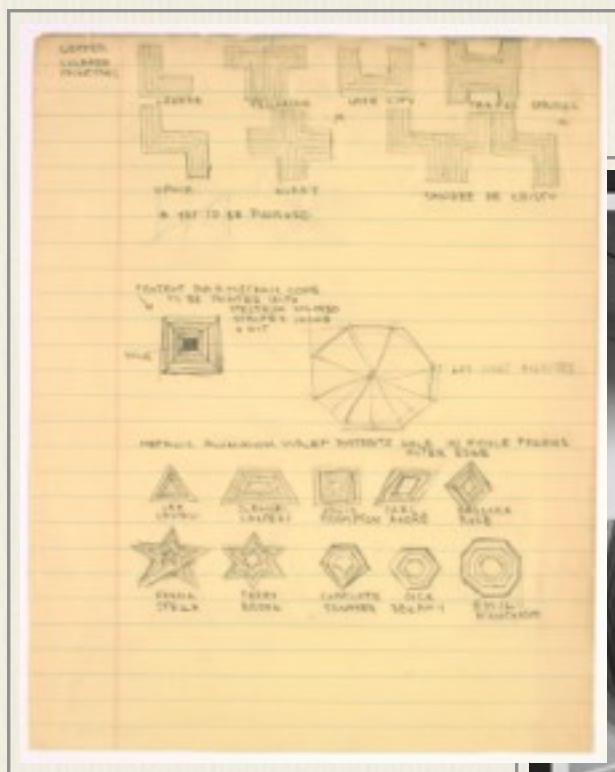
In his most admired paintings, Pollock would not search for a representational image, as the Surrealists had done, but allowed the web of dripped paint to be the only expressive element in his picture. When we look at a Pollock (ill. #8.15) we see a visual record of both the



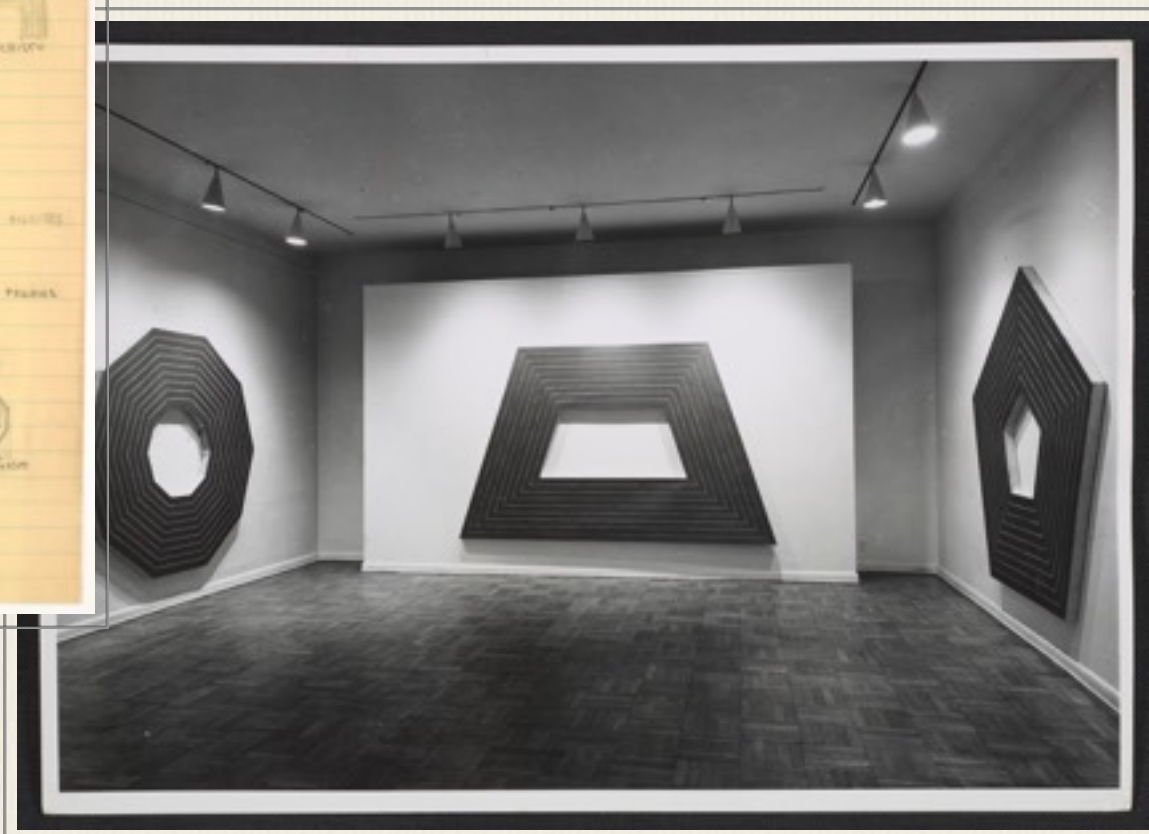
chance elements arrived through his automatic technique and his improvised responses to those elements. One could say therefore that a Pollock picture is a psychological record of the mind and emotions of the artist as he was engaged in painting. While few other abstract expressionists came close to Pollock's extreme form of automatism, in the work of artists like Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, gesture and the emotional aspects of decision-making formed central elements of their art.

### The minimalist mode

Pollock and his contemporaries justified their abstractions in relation to their psychological identities. Instead of abstracting from nature, the process of abstraction, at least theoretically, flowed from their personalities. The next generation of non-objective artists accepted abstraction as a given and did not believe they needed to justify non-objective work by making them metaphors for something else—nature, the machine, or the self. They sought to de-personalize the creative act and proposed that their works of art should only be understood as objects. They asked audiences to consider the physical characteristics of the painting or sculpture for what it itself was and not to try to see through the structural qualities of the artwork for some further meaning behind it.



Ills. #8.16 Frank Stella List of Copper series, 1960-61 and Purple Series, 1961, pencil on lined yellow paper, 27.3 x 21.5 cm, Kunstmuseum, Basel



Ills. #8.17 Rudy Burckhardt, *Frank Stella Purple Painting Exhibition*, Leo Castelli Gallery, NY, January 1964, gelatin silver print, 18 x 26 cm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Whereas the abstract expressionists had been extremely intuitive in their approach to art making (much like Kandinsky and Mondrian before them), the artists practicing minimalist abstraction generally took a highly conceptual approach to the art-making process. They could, unlike the abstract expressionists, anticipate the final appearance of the artwork early in the process. An artist like the American painter Frank Stella could effectively plan a painting on a sheet of paper (see ill. #8.16), indicating the basic shapes, color and materials for his pictures, so that all that remained was to construct the stretchers, stretch the canvas, and apply the paint, all according to the initial diagram.

Minimal abstractionists often choose to work in grid patterns because it is both easy to conceptualize how the work of art would look prior to its execution and because grids tend to minimize relationships between various elements within the grid. Where Malevich or Pollock created relational pictures, where the viewer is invited to compare one element of the painting with another (as in the illusion of movement in Malevich's red rectangles), the object-oriented artists all but eliminated any events in their work. This results in works of art that possess great visual clarity and extreme simplicity of form. In pictures like Stella's from 1963 (ill. #8.17) the actual shaping of the canvas on stretchers four or five inches thick and the elimination of any surface to the picture that did not conform to the diagrammed shape heightened the object character of the paintings. The hard three-dimensionality of his pictures were further emphasized by the linear pattern of glossy aluminum paint. There is no room in such work for the personality of the artist, or for nature. As Stella himself once commented "I liked the idea, thinking about flatness and depth, that these would be very hard paintings to penetrate. All of the action would be on the surface, and that metallic surface would be, in effect, kind of resistant. You couldn't penetrate it, both literally and, I suppose, visually." In other words, the paintings subscribed to the idea that what you see is what you get.

#### The photographic mode

At about the same moment when, in the early 1960s, minimalist artists were exploring the object nature of art, other artists became fascinated with modern advertising and other mass-reproduced media. In the United States this fascination led to the development of what quickly became known as Pop art, short for popular art. Pop artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Ed Ruscha incorporated media images, advertising, and brand labels into their art. So closely did the Pop artists imitate their sources that it is often not possible to decide whether they wished



to comment on modern American commercial culture or were simply uncritically repeating their source materials.



Ills. #8.18 Andy Warhol, *210 Coca Cola Bottles*, 1962, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas, 209.6 x 266.7 cm, Daros Collection, Switzerland, © 2007 Pro Litteris, CH-8033 Zürich

Most people wouldn't consider an Andy Warhol painting like *210 Coca Cola Bottles* (ills. #8.18) to be a work of abstract art. After all, something is being represented here, the repeated image of a Coca Cola bottle variously colored. Warhol, who worked as a graphic designer in advertising before becoming an artist, treats his subject matter however as if it were an abstract unit in his composition, like a paint stroke or a colored plane, to be arranged on a plain, grey-ground canvas. He lines up his bottles in a grid pattern filling the entire painting save for one band at the bottom. While the painting vaguely resembles a display case in a grocery store, nothing supports the lines of bottles and it's obvious that they have simply been serially printed on the canvas.

Warhol was often concerned with replicating brand images, like the characteristic shape of the Coca Cola bottle (today all but disappeared from the company's line of product packaging) or the labels of Campbell Soup cans, which Warhol made classic and which encouraged the company to keep the labels unchanged for decades. Because Warhol himself isn't selling the product whose brand he is using, but is making art instead, he



encourages the viewer to see his pictures abstractly, as arrangements of signs, rather than as arrangements of meaningful objects. As viewers we recognize the presence of the Coca Cola bottles and the soup cans, but Warhol's approach otherwise empties them of meaning. Because we know what these brand images refer to, viewers can project whatever personal meaning such products might have for them, but Warhol himself creates no meaning that can be definitively attached to these brands. They are as abstract in their own way as flat red rectangles on a white ground in a Malevich painting.

Warhol took not only a conceptual, but also a mechanical approach to picture making. Using the silkscreen printing technique, Warhol could create a single image and then repeatedly print it onto canvases (as well as three-dimensional objects) as often as he chose or as the design warranted. His paintings effectively imitated the mass-reproducible abilities of the photograph, a single negative or digital file being capable of unlimited copies. Since Warhol, many artists who work partially or wholly in an abstract manner have imitated Warhol's appropriation of pre-existing images and his mechanical technique for applying those images to canvas. In other words, many abstract or semi-abstract works of art today are printed rather than painted, in the conventional sense of an artist applying paint to a surface with a brush.



Ills. #8.19 Gerhard Richter, Townscape Madrid, 1968, oil on canvas, 277 x 292 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (long-term loan from The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection, San Francisco, © Gerhard Richter

One of the most admired painters working today is the German artist Gerhard Richter. He began his career painting from photographs under the influence of Warhol. Early on he projected photographs onto a canvas surface, and copied them, replicating the effect



of out-of-focus photographs. Richter's 'blur' was what initially distinguished his pictures from their photographic source; it is what made them appear visual interesting, especially since many of the photographs he used were of very prosaic subjects, like a toilet paper roll or, in the illustrated example, an aerial photograph of a city (see ill. #8.19). Out of focus, with the sharp edges of buildings and streets blurred, the aerial view of a city resembles an abstract expressionist abstraction.

Ills. #8.20 Gerhard Richter, 192  
*Colors*, 1966 oil on canvas, 200 cm x  
 150 cm, Hamburger Kunsthalle (loan  
 from a private collection), © Gerhard  
 Richter

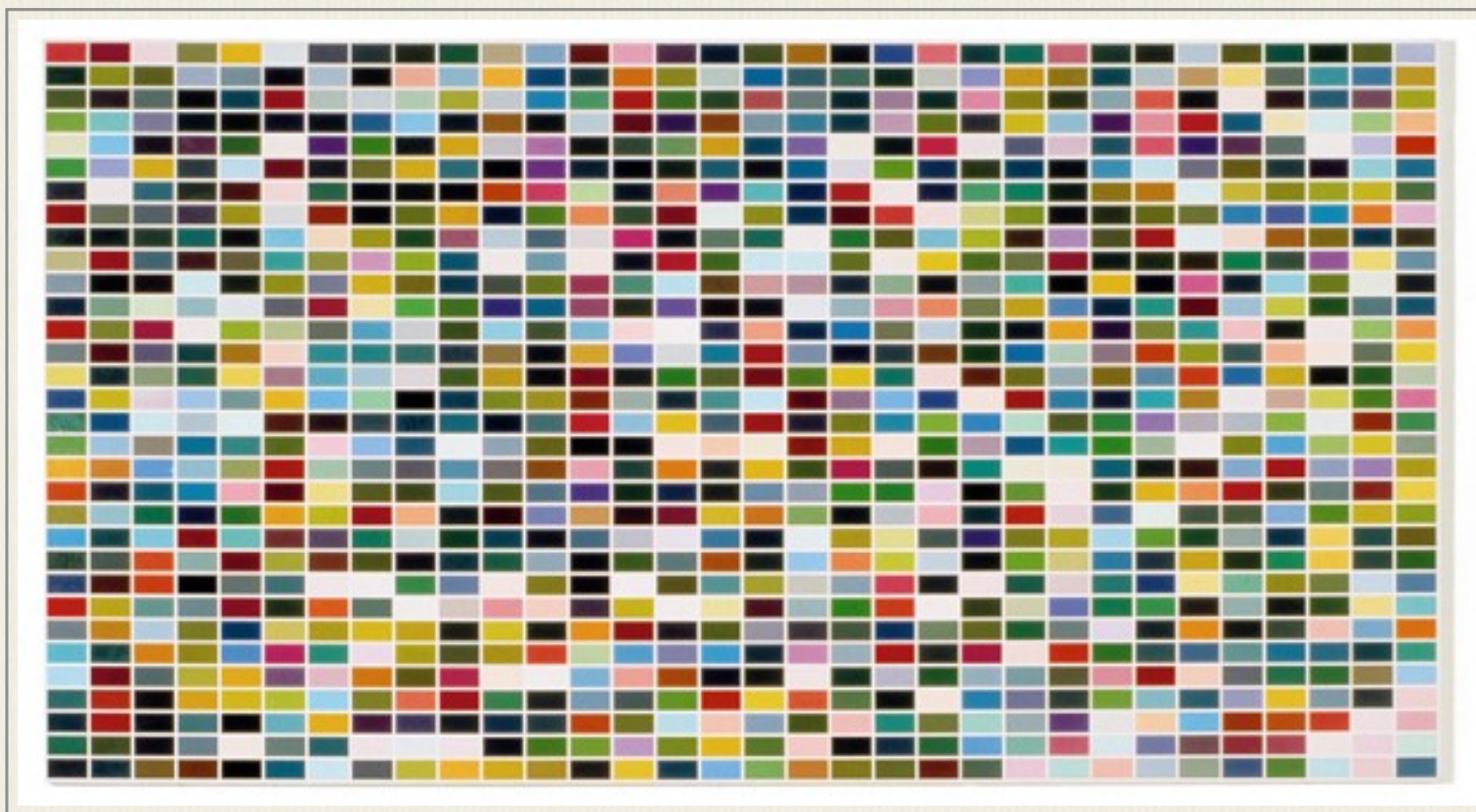
Most of Richter's subsequent work has related to photography in some manner, although how is not always immediately apparent. For example, thinking about mass, mechanical reproduction, Richter has made numerous geometric, non-objective paintings that are based on paint sample photographs like those seen in any hardware store, the kind used by the consumer to select exactly the color of paint desired. Like the Warhol use of Coca-Cola bottles, these 'samples' could be endlessly multiplied. For example, in 1966 Richter made a large painting, over six feet tall, in an arrangement of six simple paint colors separated by wide white bands, to emphasize the distinctiveness of each color, just as paint samples do. Then he repeated the formula, on an even larger canvas, this time using 192 colors (ills. #8.20).



He has continued to paint variations of the 'paint sample' canvases. In 1973 for example he painted a canvas almost 14 feet long using 1024 colors (ills. #8.21). Not content with painting geometric abstractions, Richter has taken photographs of strokes of paint, projected them onto a



canvas and reproduced their effect in large scale. On the surface Richter's gestural abstractions look resemble the gestural abstractions of Pollock and other American abstract expressionists, but in reality, Richter's picture is as planned and as mechanical as the Warhol Coca Cola bottles painting.



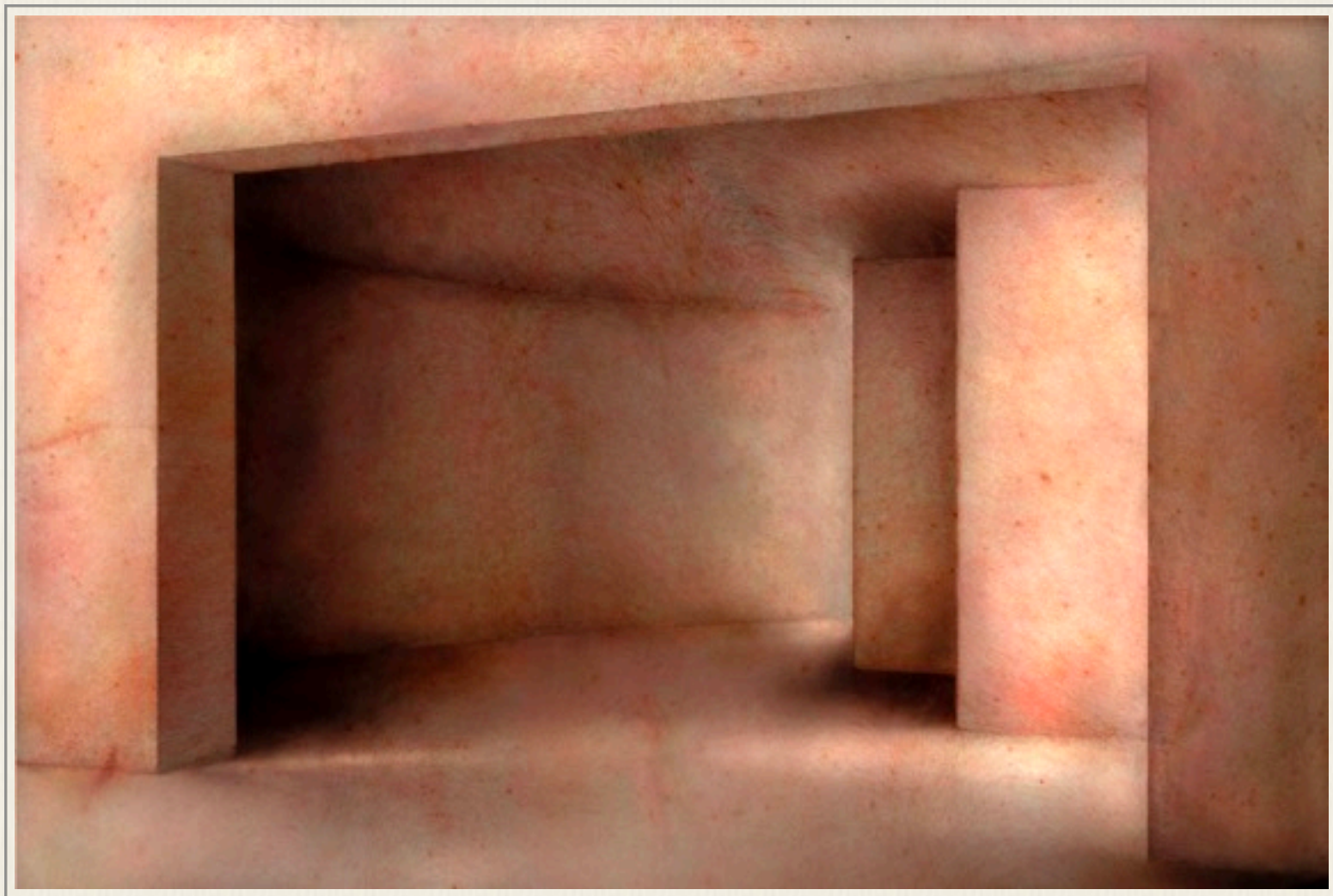
Ills. #8.21 Gerhard Richter, 1024 Colors in Four Permutations, 1973, enamel on canvas, 254 x 425 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris © Gerhard Richter

### The digital mode

The digital mode is more about new technologies than it is about style or any sort of visual appearance. In a sense digital abstraction is closely connected to photographic abstraction in that it applies many of the same principles, such as the appropriation of pre-existing media imagery. What is new however is the ease with which images can be copied, altered and reimagined using readily accessible computer software. There have been so many innovations in digital technology that artists today are still catching up to the potential of the media. Some artists have taken advantage of software to create digital designs that would be difficult to imagine or execute without the processing power of the computer. With a single computer individuals can create video content that only a generation ago would have taken a huge production team to achieve. And because of the global interconnectedness of the internet, the domain for future digital abstractions in still or video format in digital format are



likely increasingly to be virtual works of art rather than physical objects.



Ills #8.22 Aziz + Cucher, Interior #5, 1998, C-print, Courtesy of the artists, © Aziz + Cucher

Digital technologies erode the boundaries between what is real and what is abstract or exists only as a virtual reality. The photography team of Aziz + Cucher did a remarkable series of photographs (ills. #8.22) in which they used software to graft photographs of human skin onto an architectural framework. For example, in this image, what seems at first glance to be a nondescript staircase becomes on close inspection an eerie evocation of human anatomy, as the viewer begins to recognize the freckles, pores, and various skin blemishes. The image is both evocative and unsettling, hovering between two modes of the viewer's consciousness, as architecture, and as human anatomy. Today we are continually confronted with the appearance of the real, when in fact everything that we see is constructed on a computer. With the digital age, abstraction has taken on entirely new meanings that have enormous cultural, political, and economic consequences that we are only beginning to understand.



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## On collage

Since the beginning of the 20th century, collage, like abstract art, has been a key practice of modern artists. In fact, it can be argued that collage is the century's single most important artistic innovation. As Damien Hirst, one of the most influential artists working in the world today, has stated, "The greatest idea of the twentieth century was collage. I just see it all like collage." Like abstraction, collage is a practice rather than a conventional genre. But also like abstraction, collage is so ubiquitous in 20th century art that it is impossible to imagine modern art without it.

The dictionary definitions of collage hardly do justice to collage's importance to modern art: 1) "a form of art in which various materials such as photographs and pieces of paper or fabric are arranged and stuck to a backing" 2) "a composition made in this way" and 3) "a combination or collection of various things." The third definition comes closest to explaining why collage has become the defining practice of recent art. By combining and collecting various things collage transformed the nature of art in multiple directions. First, collage is, like abstraction, an expression of the modern artist's autonomy, the freedom that comes from working without patrons and predetermined expectations. But much more than abstraction, the use of collage reflects the dominance of conceptual approaches in twentieth-century art.

What collage allows artists to do is to bring anything from the outside world into the arena of art and have that thing or image be considered as part of or the whole art object. For example, the American artist, Robert Rauschenberg collected fragments of houses and automobiles to create his *Oracle* (ills. #9.1), as part of a collaboration with engineers from Bell Laboratories to explore the potential interactions between art and technology. As Rauschenberg initially conceived the project, *Oracle's* five independent 'wagons', composed of window frames, heating ducts, car doors, etc., each containing a radio transmitter, could be wheeled by the audience into multiple possible arrangements. Rauschenberg had hoped that *Oracle's* wagons could also respond to their environment by automatically tuning the radios to different signals in order to produce a collage of constantly changing sounds. In 1997 for a traveling retrospective, new transmitters were designed that did randomly rotate the dials of the





Ills. #9.1 Robert Rauschenberg, *Oracle*, 1962-65, Five-part found-metal assemblage with five concealed radios: ventilation duct; automobile door on typewriter table, with crushed metal; ventilation duct in washtub and water, with wire basket; constructed staircase control unit housing batteries and electronic components; and wooden window frame with ventilation duct, dimensions variable, Centre Pompidou, Paris, © 2018 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

transmitters to create unexpected audio juxtapositions. Today, *Oracle* belongs to the collection of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, where it is offered to the public as a static (do not touch) and silent art object.

In its many permutations *Oracle* represents a combination of sophisticated electronic technology and industrial junk. Rauschenberg significantly transformed some of the material he used, but much of his found materials remain unaltered. So, besides freedom in choice of materials, collage helped artists to begin to question the traditional valuing of craft—the shaping of materials into an image—as the most important measure of artistic achievement. And the proliferation of art materials encouraged artists to work across the well-defined media of past art (e.g. painting, sculpture, photography, etc.) and to make works of art that defy categorization by medium.

Any one thing or image can be collected through collage and then juxtaposed to any other thing or image or sound, as Rauschenberg does in *Oracle*. This practice affected a profound change in contemporary attitudes regarding the role of meaning in art. Appropriated objects and images inevitably carry their own prior meanings or associations into the work of art in which they are placed. In the past, we might consider meaning to be the expression of an artist's intentions. But with collage



meaning became increasingly open-ended. This marks a pronounced shift in the way we think about art in Western culture. Instead of associating the production of meaning with the artist, meaning came to be seen as relational--the increasing importance attached to the context and reception of works of art--and thus more a matter of the audience's interpretation than the artist's intentions. For example, Rauschenberg, in giving *Oracle* its title, perhaps viewed his work as a kind of modern ruin in which he has substituted urban refuse for a ruined Greek temple inhabited by priestesses; in this temple radio broadcasts replace prophecies. This is a way of thinking about the artwork in which the artist 'puts' the meaning into the work. Yet, it seems as likely that the title of the work was suggested to Rauschenberg by the elements he more or less by chance chose to use. If this is true, Rauschenberg was no closer to defining *Oracle*'s meaning than anyone else, the artist is simply the first (albeit most important) audience of his own work.



Ills. #9.2 Diego Velázquez wall, The National Gallery, London, 2018

By complicating and destabilizing the potential responses to an artwork, collage over the course of the 20th century encouraged the growing perception that meaning in art is always a collaboration between artist and audience. This is not to say that contemporary artists, even when using collage, have given up all ambition to say something in particular through their work. Rather, this statement simply acknowledges



that works of art always resonate in ways that artists cannot anticipate, whether in the 21st century or the 15th century. Nor can we say that everyone now fully believes in the necessarily relational nature of meaning in art, its close dependence on context and reception. One only has to visit a major picture gallery, such as the National Gallery in London, to be reminded of the fact that many still believe that an art work can simply be displayed, without explanation, with a mere label that identifies the artist, as if such an object is an autonomous bearer of its own meaning. But let's consider the picture gallery as another kind of collage, where the room, the wall color, the way the pictures are hung together, represent at least one other level of meaning that is the creation, not of the painter, but of the curator, who has gathered these things together in this way to convey certain, not always fully examined, ideas about art. Indeed, one of the central accomplishments of collage is that, especially in recent years, it has strongly blurred the perception of the differences separating the artist from the curator. Artists now collect and arrange things just as curators do, and present their collections as art. Conversely, we are becoming increasingly aware of the artfulness of the curator's collections and arrangements (see ill. #9.2). A simple example might be, say, a 19th-century documentary photograph, which its maker never perceived or intended to be viewed as art. Now, this photograph has been collected by the museum and carefully framed and mounted on a wall. In the process, this photograph, which began as non-art, has become art, and without ever having passed through the hands of someone calling herself an artist.

### Collage and assemblage

Pablo Picasso and his collaborator Georges Braque are often credited with the 'invention' of collage. But like many other great cultural innovations the practice of collage predates its 'discovery.' That is to say, long before Picasso made his first collages in 1912 people were pasting clippings of a loved one's hair on to photographs of the person. Commercial photographers were already experimenting with combining multiple photographs together to produce surprising and engaging juxtapositions. The makers of such images, however, never intended them to be considered as art. And that is the difference; Picasso and Braque were the first to present the practice of collage as a serious art form.

Picasso and Braque's collages developed out of problems posed by his earlier cubist oil paintings, which tended to become unreadable, and therefore abstract. To tie their paintings to an observable reality, Picasso and Braque began to insert painted letters and similar visual cues to assist the viewer in seeing what was being represented. In *Still Life*



with *Chair Caning* (ills. #9.3) Picasso paints the letters JOU, which might indicate the French word for newspaper, "Journal", or the verb "jouir", which means to play, or Picasso may have intended both readings. I read the JOU as part of a folded newspaper that lies on a café table. The table's shape is oval, which is a visual pun, since a round table will appear as an oval when viewed obliquely. At the center of his picture Picasso has painted the circular foot of a wineglass; further up, and now seen from the side is the transparent, curving flute of the same glass. At the very top of the glass we see the circular shape of its lip, as if we were looking down at it. To the right of the glass is a lemon, cut in



Ills. #9.3 Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, oil on oil-cloth over canvas edged with rope, 29 x 37 cm, Musée National Picasso, Paris, © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

half by a knife, which is shown in profile, sitting on a napkin. These and other visual clues suggest that our viewing position is at once vertical to the table, looking straight down, and at a 45 degree angle, and of course, since the actual painting hangs vertically on the wall, at an approximately a 90 degree right angle. Underneath the painted objects in the lower left quadrant of his picture, Picasso glued commercially manufactured oilcloth with a chair-caning pattern printed on it. It was the sort of thing the French might attach to a solid bottom café chair to make it look like its more expensive cousin. In this picture, the faux chair caning might refer to the seat of a chair, slid underneath the



table. Finally Picasso surrounds his canvas, not with the customary frame, but with the unusual device of a rope, whose weave gives the painting its exterior decorative patterning. The rope is the third way in which Picasso brings the world into art; an appropriate object joins the traditional hand-painted representations of objects and the mechanically reproduced imitation of caning weaving.

One might compare Picasso's multiple perspectives and multiple means of representation to the single perspective and translucent surface of a typical Dutch still life (see ill. #5.9). If the Dutch artist wants us to know more about the features of the objects he depicts, he has to resort to showing us a peeled lemon or he tips over the serving dish so that we can see the ornately decorated surface of its bowl. All the while the artist represents these objects as if they were real, and not painted fictions. Picasso reminds us that what we are looking at is always a creation of the artist's imagination.

Not long after completing *Still Life with Chair Caning* Picasso and fellow Cubist Georges Braque began making collages out of cut pieces of paper (known by their French name: *papier collé*). In works like *Guitar*, *Sheet Music*, and *Wine Glass* (see #5.12) Picasso manages almost effortlessly to convey not only the shape, but also something of the three dimensionality of a guitar, sitting on a table, accompanied by a glass of wine, a newspaper and a page of sheet music. The material, the volume, and the shape of a guitar are indicated by a piece of paper painted in a wood grain pattern, whose outline echoes the familiar shape of the instrument. Although the collage is visually very flat, Picasso still creates the illusion of depth with such features as the sounding hole at the center of his composition and the black curving paper, which serves both to indicate the bottom edge of the guitar and the shadow beneath it. From paper 'drawings' Picasso moved to three-dimensional objects using a variety of non-traditional art materials.

In Picasso's collage work the artist always remained tied to a natural model of artistic representation, no matter how disparate the materials he used. We have a number of photographs of collage constructions Picasso made in his studio but never publicly exhibited (presumably Picasso destroyed the projects after photographing them). In *Photocomposition* (ill. #9.4) Picasso took a cubist painting he had been working on, and with rope suspended a real guitar from its top, then pinned paper arms to each side of the image of the guitar player. Finally, he set in front of this assemblage a real table with bottle, pipe, tablecloth, etc., the subject of so many of Picasso's cubist paintings and collage works. It is important to note that the real and the represented elements of Picasso's



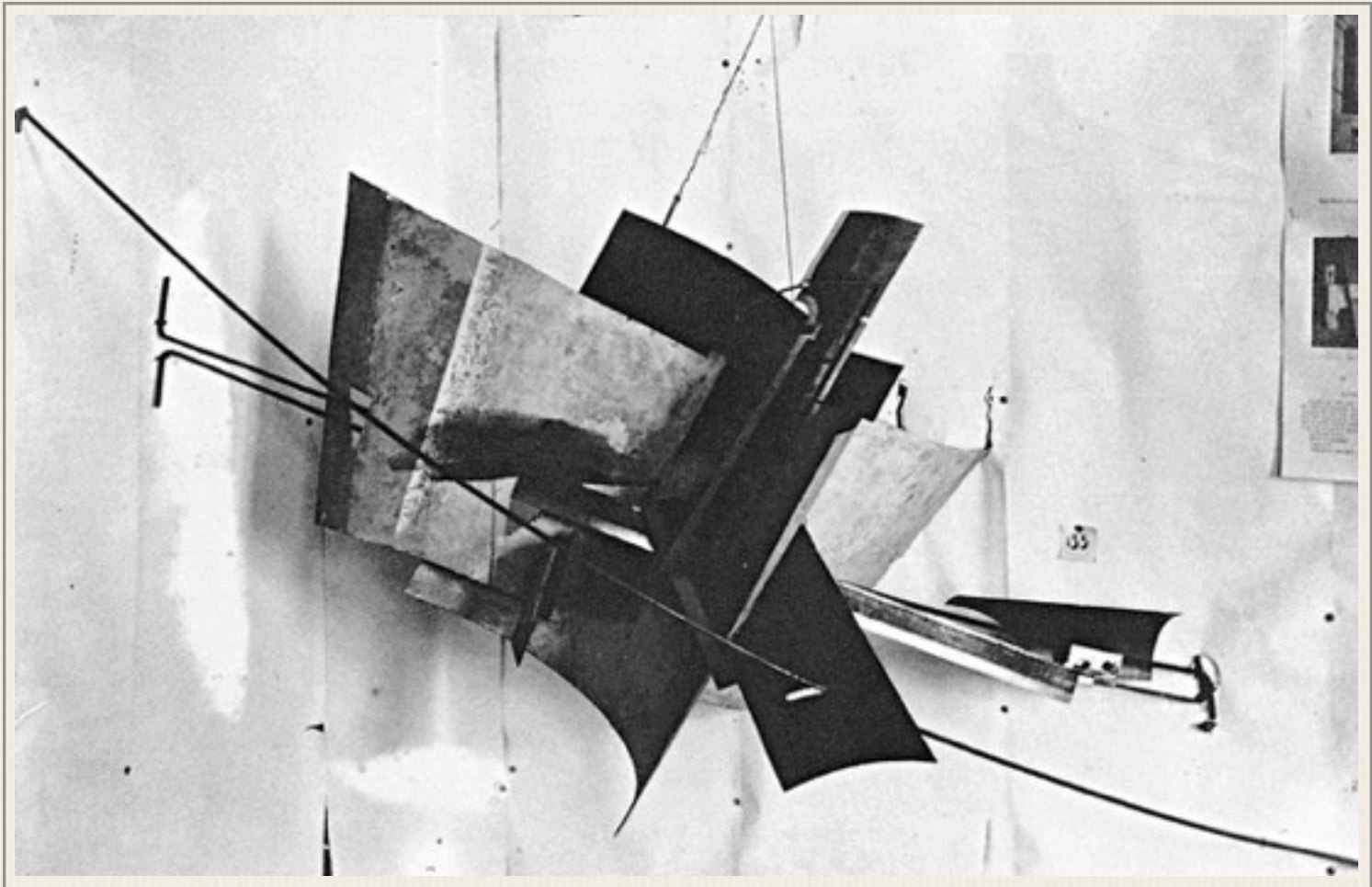
Ills. #9.4 Pablo Picasso,  
*Photographic composition with  
Construction with Guitar Player  
and Violin*, 1913, gelatin  
silver print. 4 11.8 x 8.7 cm,  
private collection © 2011  
Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists  
Rights Society (ARS), NY

mixed media creation  
(is it a sculpture or  
a painting or a  
photograph?) retain  
the relative  
proportion and  
location of the  
objects and the  
'guitar player' to  
each other that one  
would find in a  
traditional  
representational  
image.

Because such works  
by Picasso inherently  
emphasize the  
constructive aspects  
of artwork at the

expense of its representational features, other artists, in the wake of Picasso's innovation, took the collage technique in directions Picasso himself was unwilling to pursue. In the chapter on abstraction, we noted how Kazimir Malevich was inspired both by Picasso's painted cubist pictures and his collage work to create non-objective art in which the elements Malevich employed were no longer grounded in perception, but were imaginative constructions based on the logic of art rather than on their resemblance to a natural model. Another young Russian artist, Vladimir Tatlin, who briefly visited Picasso's studio before the First World War, took Picasso's collage technique in sculpture in a direction parallel to that of Malevich in painting. Tatlin emulated Picasso's use of non-traditional materials, but, like Malevich, applied them in a wholly non-representational manner (ills. #9.5). Employing such materials as wood, rope, and sheet metal, Tatlin used the physical qualities of the materials, their shape, and relative position as the only expressive elements of his sculpture. And because he chose to attach these objects





Ills. #9.5 Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief*, 1915, original presumed destroyed

Tatlin removed gravity, mass and volume from his sculpture. It is as if he were trying to make three-dimensional paintings, something similar in sculpture to Malevich's Suprematist works, like the *Eight Red Rectangles* of 1915 (see ill. #8.11).



Ills. #9.6 Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, 1958, oil on canvas, printed paper, textile, paper, a metal sign, wood, rubber heels, a tennis ball, a stuffed Angora goat with paint, and a painted rubber tire, 106.5 x 160.6 x 163.5 cm, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg

Much later, in the 1950s a name was given to the practice of creating sculptures from disparate, modern materials: assemblage. Rauschenberg was the key innovator in this approach, restlessly exploring the expressive possibilities of a wide variety of materials. Instead of confining himself to strokes or drips of paint on canvas, Rauschenberg attached to canvases photographs, postcards, bedding, the Sunday comics, flattened umbrellas, clocks, car tires, and even, in the famous 1958 work, *Monogram* (ills. #9.6) a stuffed angora goat wearing a tire. Rauschenberg described such pieces as 'combines' but the most widely used term for elaborate, three-dimensional collage construction is assemblage.



ills. #9.7 Edward Kienholz, *The Portable War Memorial*, 1968, mixed media and objects, tape, Coca-Cola-machine, 285 x 240 x 950 cm, © Edward Kienholz

Assemblages, like Rauschenberg's *Oracle*, are essentially abstract. However, in the 1960s a number of artists associated with the Pop Art movement applied assemblage techniques to representational imagery. For example, the American artist Ed Kienholz created elaborate tableaux combining furniture, clothing, and other everyday objects with store manikins to create sculptures that typically had a political intent. During the Vietnam War, Kienholz created *The Portable War Memorial* (ills. #9.7) to protest America's involvement. The assemblage recreates the planting of the American flag at Iwo Jima near the end of the Second World War, only this time the flag is being planted like an umbrella at a diner. The assemblage is accompanied by a blaring sound track of Kate Smith singing 'God Bless America' on a continuous loop.

### Readymades

Collage probably cannot be broken down into different modes in the way we did for abstract art, but one can speak of a variety of practices that



developed from the initial innovation. The foremost of these is what the French artist Marcel Duchamp termed the 'readymade.' Duchamp looked at Picasso's collages of newspapers and printed labels and concluded that these found, non-art, materials would be more interesting if we simply accepted them as one found them, rather than altering them to make a new form, as Picasso did in his collage work. In 1913 Duchamp produced the first 'readymade', *Bicycle Wheel*, which consisted of the front wheel of a bicycle fixed inverted onto the top of a stool. In this way, Duchamp made perhaps the world's first kinetic sculpture, since the viewer could choose to spin the bicycle wheel. Duchamp later described *Bicycle Wheel* as an "assisted readymade" since he combined two different materials, a stool and a wheel, to create a new work. Within a year, however, Duchamp had nominated an object to be his first unaltered readymade, when he purchased a wine bottle drying rack, which he kept in his studio as a work of art.

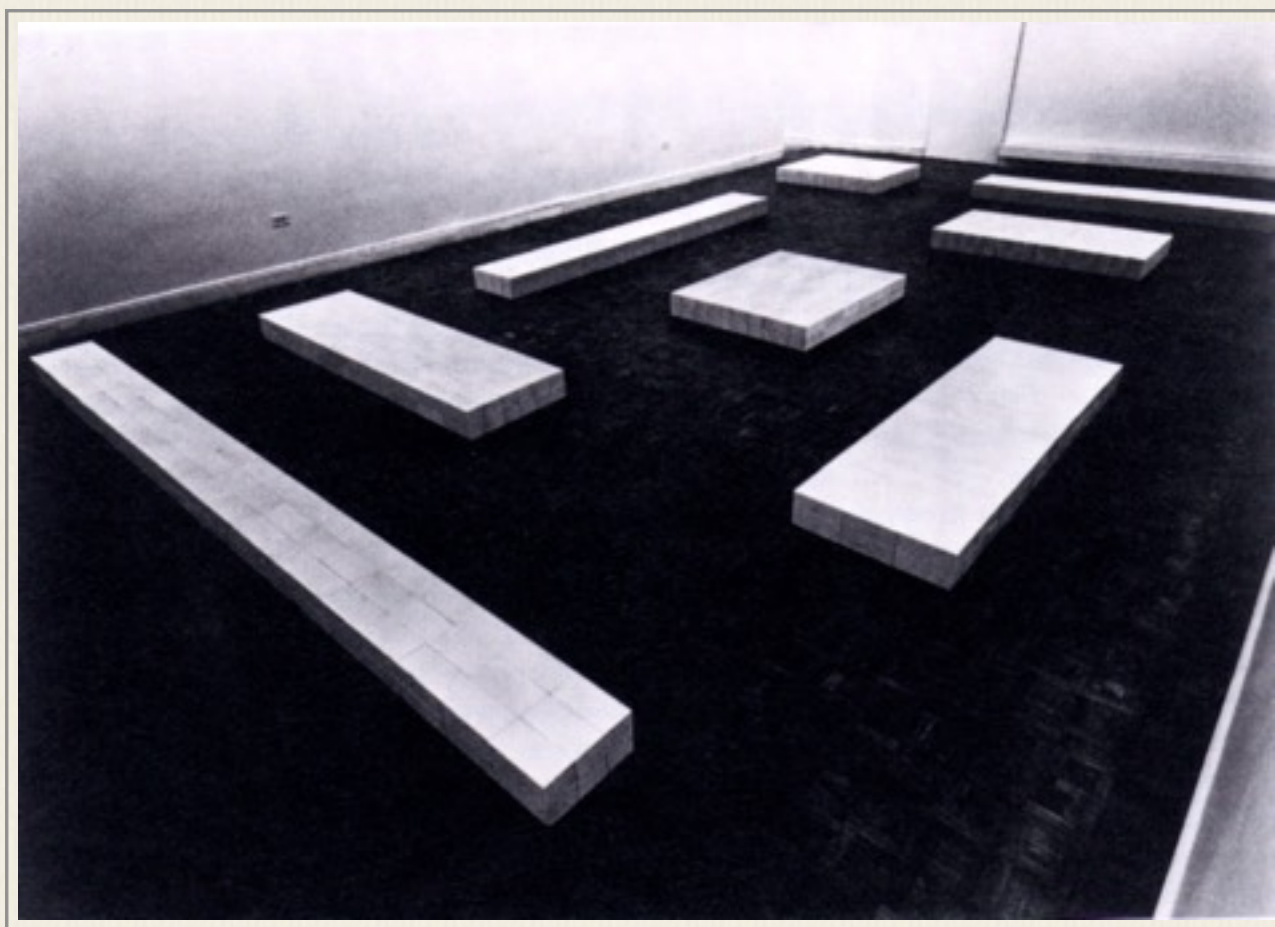
Ills. #9.8 Marcel Duchamp, *Bottle Rack*, 1963 [replica of 1914 original], 74.3 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm, Norton Simon Museum of Art, Pasadena, Ca., © Association Marcel Duchamp

Although *Bottle Rack* (ills. #9.8) doesn't seem like a collage, because it has only one element, it is something collected from the world of everyday life, like Picasso's pieces of paper, rope and imitation chair caning, and then placed in an art context. In justifying the readymades, Duchamp said that he "was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products." For Duchamp, the idea of appropriating the object is what mattered, not the object itself. In fact, most of Duchamp's readymades survive only in the form of photographs and later reproductions (the 1914 *Bottle Rack* illustrated here Duchamp actually had replicated and sold to the museum in 1963).

Duchamp apparently abandoned the original readymades when he moved his studios. In 1915 he moved from Paris to New York, and while there he created a second version of the bicycle wheel. The *Bottle Rack*, which he also first thought of in Paris, did not make it to New York either, but survives only in photographs and later three-dimensional reproductions the



artist commissioned. Again, Duchamp's choice not to preserve the original objects underlines his attitude that it was the idea of making art this way that is what is important about these works and not the permanence of their physical existence.



Ills. #9.9 Carl Andre, *Equivalents I-VIII*, 1966 (Installation at Tibor de Nagy Gallery), photo courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, N.Y.

Since Duchamp, artists have frequently resorted to appropriating everyday objects and repositioning them as art. For example, in the 1960s the minimalist abstractionist sculptor Carl Andre became famous for his works composed of common, industrial firebricks (ills. #9.9). To create these works, Andre basically had only to determine the number of firebricks to be used in the project and how they were to be laid out on the floor. Andre might sell to a collector or museum simply a set of instructions describing how the bricks were to be arranged and leave it to the buyer to purchase the bricks from a local brickyard, as well as to perform the task of arranging the bricks on the floor according to the artist's design.

Andy Warhol took Duchamp's concept of readymades and applied it to modern commercial products, not only in making paintings of Campbell's Soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles, but also sculptures that are made to look like the cardboard boxes in which these products are delivered to the supermarket. For example, Warhol created a series of objects that mirrored the packaging of the Brillo box (ills. #9.10). As in his other





Ills. #9.10 Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes*, 1970 [refabrication of 1964 edition], Commercial silkscreen inks on industrially fabricated plywood box supports, each: 50.8 x 50.8 x 43.2 cm, Gift of John Coplans in memory of Ruth C. Roush, 1980 Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College

pieces, the artist silkscreened the packaging design of the Brillo box onto a wooden box, painted white. Other than the fact that his Brillo boxes are made out of silkscreen on plywood rather than printed cardboard, everything about Warhol's work is identical with the commercial product. Warhol replicates the brand's image, and asks us to admire it not as something to arouse the purchaser's interest in buying the product contained within the packaging, but as art.

Warhol's approach to advertising and consumer culture has inspired many younger artists. For example, in the 1980s the American artist Jeff Koons purchased various consumer products, such as wet/dry vacuum cleaners, and placed them in Plexiglas vitrines, lit with banks of neon lights (ills. #9.11). These ordinary objects acquire a high-gloss quality that makes them glamorous and desirable in a manner unrelated to their actual use. Koons claims to have chosen the vacuum cleaner because "It is a breathing machine. It also displays both male and female sexuality. It has orifices and phallic attachments." Even if Koons really did choose the vacuum cleaner for these reasons, this is an example of the distance one often finds today between the artist's intention and the audience's



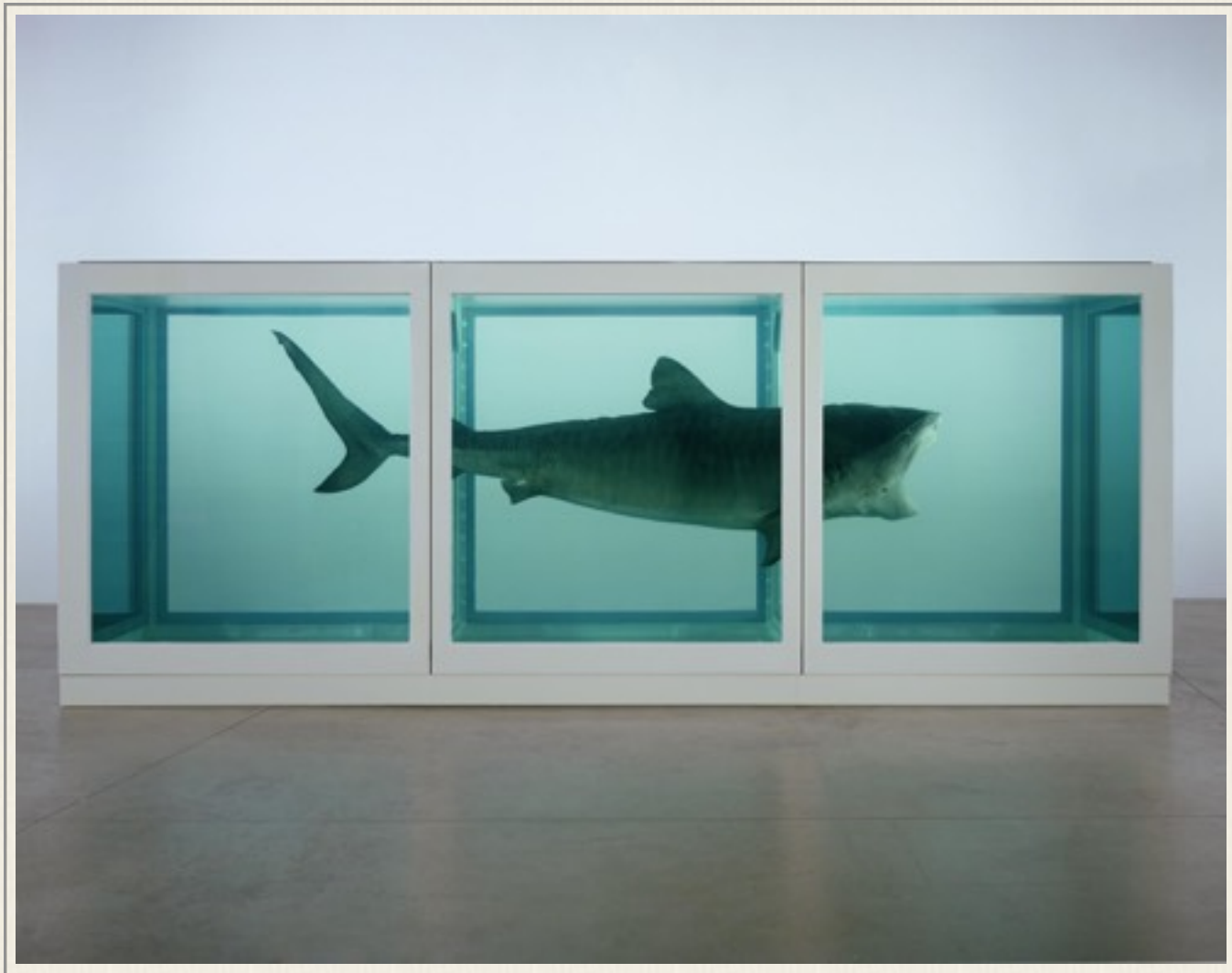
Ills. #9.11 Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Red, Brown, New Shelton Wet/Dry 10 Gallon Displaced Doubledecker*, 1981-87, 4 vacuum cleaners, Perspex and fluorescent lights, 251 x 137 x 71.5 cm, Tate Modern, London, © Jeff Koons

responses. That the vacuum cleaner exhibits sexual characteristics might not have occurred to someone looking at this work. Knowledge of Koon's statement might reshape to some degree our experience of the work, but it might also be as likely that our own experiences with these household objects will condition our experience of the work's meaning, whatever the artist may say. This uncertainty about whether or not we should take Koons' intentions seriously is, in fact, one of the predominant conditions of contemporary art. Audiences have often been confronted by artists, from Duchamp, to Warhol, to Koons, to the newest

generation of artists, the meaning of whose works are at best ambiguous. In contemporary art it is very often the case that meaning is a kind a negotiation between artist, artwork, and audience. It is not something to be decided in advance by the artist.

In recent years one of the most celebrated examples of appropriation has been the work of the English artist Damien Hirst. In a famous bit of packaging that echoes Koons' product vitrines, Hirst placed a 14-foot long tiger shark, which he paid a fisherman to catch for him off the coast of Australia, suspended in a glass tank full of formaldehyde (ills. #9.12). He then gave this packaged readymade the evocative title *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. The original shark rather quickly decomposed in its tank and in 2006 a new shark, more expertly preserved, was installed in the original tank. The work is estimated to have cost





Ills. #9.12 Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark and formaldehyde solution, 217 x 542 x 180 cm, artist's collection, © Damien Hirst

about 50,000 English pounds to produce and was originally sold to an American collector for what is believed to be around eight million dollars. Perhaps because Hirst's work has sold for such dramatically high prices, he is often held up as an example of the ills of the contemporary art world, where so little value apparently is attached to craft. Yet these views are shortsighted. They adhere to a limited notion of what art is and can be, notions that are profoundly challenged by the collage technique.

### Montage and photomontage

One of the most important practices to develop out of collage is what came to be known as montage, a term used both to describe a class of art objects and a technique in filmmaking. One can take a very restrictive or very expansive definition for either of these two terms. In art, photomontage could most restrictively be defined as the use of photographs and similar mass reproduced visual material instead of newsprint and colored paper to make a single pictorial composition through the juxtaposition of fragments of multiple images and/or designs. The montage technique allows artists to place unrelated photographed fragments of

reality on a single surface. But one can define montage more broadly, especially since, in recent years, new digital technologies and other instruments for mechanical reproductions have allowed artists to apply montage techniques in the creation of everything from artist videos to paintings to sculpture, as well as works of art that are not restricted to any one of these traditional media definitions.

In film, montage can be very narrowly defined as passages in a film in which there are frequent, abrupt juxtapositions or superimpositions of multiple shots, used to suggest such things as a lengthy passage of time (such as the timeline montage that opens the American television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*). During the 1920s, in Soviet Russia, filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein theorized montage as a means to create a 'third', political meaning through the juxtaposition of different shots, most famously illustrated in the 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, and especially the segment of the film depicting soldiers shooting civilians on a flight of steps in the city of Odessa. The film rapidly alternates between shots of the soldiers marching down the steps and firing their rifles with shots of the growing panic among the civilians among the dead and wounded.

Far more broadly, the French use the word montage simply to refer to the film editing process, in which pieces of film are selected and pieced together to create the movie or video. This most expansive definition is illustrated in innumerable films and television programs, in which the editors use abrupt juxtapositions of scenes cut together to form a single cohesive narrative. The viewer might be shown a scene of a jetliner taking off or landing at an airport, followed, with no other transition, by a scene of a car approaching a hotel. We assume these two scenes are temporally related (the plane lands, the person arrives at the hotel), without having to see the events that lie between these two moments in time.

Montage in film and video therefore is frequently used as a way of organizing the viewer's experience of a story. In this way film montage is predominately concerned with how the viewer will experience filmic time. Similarly, montage affects the story's pacing. Frequent cutting between scenes can create tension and suspense within the film's narrative that can be completely independent of what is actually being shown in these same passages of the film. Montage can also be used for emphasis; it can bring the audience's attention to what might otherwise be overlooked. Simply inserting, say, a close-up of someone pulling a knife from a drawer into a scene otherwise devoted to people gathering for a dinner party might suggest that at some point the knife is going to play a significant role in how the story will unfold.





Ills. #9.13 John Heartfield, *Deutsche Eichen* (German Acorns), 1932, from *AIZ*, No. 37 September 21, 1933, p. 627, photogravure, 37.47 x 26 cm, Akron Art Museum

In still photography, it is space, not time, that is most affected by montage. New meanings, unintended by the original photographs, could be produced through the juxtaposition of multiple pictures and/or designs and/or texts (captions). Photomontage can be used, like film montage, as a guide in the telling of a story, the communication of specific ideas, and to emphasize particular details. The German artist John Heartfield employed photomontage, for example, to create forceful political messages.

Heartfield published numerous photomontages that protested the rise of Nazism in Germany and the reestablishment of the German war machine early in the 1930s. In a characteristic work, *German Acorns* (ills. #9.13), Heartfield denounced the National Socialist plan to invest in armament production by creating a montage featuring Adolf Hitler watering a tree bearing acorns composed of photographs of helmets, bullets, and bombs. Heartfield's montages tell stories about German political corruption by connecting one kind of social manifestation (Adolf Hitler as a political figure) to another (military hardware), and do so in a way that looks entirely unified and somehow 'natural' even though of course his acorn-bearing oak tree is like nothing that can be found in the everyday world.

Heartfield's use of montage, no doubt intentionally, is very close to the way advertisers have been using the technique since the 1890s (long before Picasso's 'discovery' of collage). Photographers, advertising agencies, and their clients recognized early on that surprising



juxtapositions could capture consumer attention and in this way promote the product being advertised. What has changed over the years is the sophistication through which these juxtapositions are achieved.

Especially since entering the digital age and the world of Photoshop,



Ills. #9.14 Tom Hussey, photographer for Novartis Reflection Campaign, 2010, © Tom Hussey

photographers working for advertising agencies have at their disposal a heretofore-unimaginable arsenal of technologies to take, combine, alter, and enhance whatever visual material they choose to make. Just as montage is a fundamental element in most films and video so photomontage has become a ubiquitous practice in advertising. Ad designers constantly use a variety of photomontage techniques to capture consumer attention and to promote the product. In this ad campaign (ills. #9.14) for a new drug therapy for Alzheimer's victims, Novartis, the designers created a series of photographs of elder, who, when looking into a mirror, see young versions of themselves. The montaged image of the young man in uniform in the mirror is what makes the overall image intelligible and the contrast between the old man, whose life's memories are being robbed by Alzheimer's with the man he once was creates an emotional connection with the advertisement's audience. Effective use of montage in advertising, like this advertisement, creates messages that are emotionally effective, clear, simple, and eye-catching.



Perhaps it is precisely because of the ubiquity of montage imagery in advertising that artists have used the technique to undermine advertising's conventional narratives and the appearance of natural relationships that advertising tends to promote. However, it may also be an inherent condition of montage that these juxtapositions of imagery, while appearing natural, may be simultaneously regarded as irrational, even hallucinatory creations that ultimately don't make sense. Either way, artists have often used montage, especially in recent decades, to create images that attack legibility and that focus on the arbitrary selection of the imagery being juxtaposed.



Ills. #9.15 Sigmar Polke, *Alice in Wonderland*, 1971, mixed media on patterned fabric, 300 x 290 cm private collection; photo: Michael Werner Gallery, © Estate of Sigmar Polke/DACS, London/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/PR

One of the most influential and imaginative contributors to this vein of montage was the German artist Sigmar Polke. He worked in a wide variety of materials, but his working method was essentially that of a printmaker, who borrowed most of his imagery from advertising, comic books, documentary photography, art history, and so on, often displayed through a variety of layering devices, which employed everything from



thick coats of resin and lacquer to transparent sheeting and commercially printed fabrics. The 1971 work *Alice in Wonderland* (ills. #9.15) derives its title from the image of the hookah-smoking caterpillar in the original John Tenniel drawings for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The drawing however has been superimposed on a triptych composed of strips of fabric, the two 'wings' featuring a soccer match (presumably a bedspread or sheet for a child's room) while the center 'panel' consists of white egg-shaped polka dots on a black ground. Over the right panel, Polke copied a photographic image of the American basketball star, Jerry West. There can be no possible rational connection between the Alice imagery and that of Jerry West, nor do these two subjects have any connection to the grounds over which they're positioned. Each unit of Polke's composition is legible in its own way, but none of the relationships forced together in this image produce a coherent meaning. We might regard them simply as formal elements in Polke's composition, but the work is so large (about 10 ½ feet by 8 ½ feet) that it is impossible to ignore the figurative imagery in the work, to think of them strictly as visual elements. One wants, however unsuccessfully, to see meaning in these juxtapositions.

#### The Uncanny and de-familiarization

In Polke's desire to both deny meaning to popular imagery and yet create the suggestion of meaning, his work drew heavily on that of the Surrealists, who, working in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, explored a variety of ways to create new meanings out of juxtaposed everyday objects or images. The Surrealists sought to unleash what they believed to be the creative potential of the unconscious mind, unfiltered by rational thought, through a variety of techniques, such as automatism (which I discussed in the abstraction essay), and via the irrational juxtaposition of images and objects (in short, via collage). Since the Surrealists proclaimed that their art was a state of mind rather than a style, they followed Duchamp in appropriating all kinds of things and re-contextualizing them under the Surrealist umbrella. Besides the use of chance and appropriation, the Surrealists sought to create what Sigmund Freud described as the 'uncanny.' These are strange or mysterious experiences that are psychologically unsettling. The 'uncanny' is often the place where the world of dreams comes closest to our conscious everyday realities.

The Surrealists achieved the 'uncanny' in many ways. The Belgian Surrealist, René Magritte, for example, did not use found objects, like photographs, to make his pictures; Magritte painted in a conventional, even academic manner. But in his paintings (see ills. #9.16) Magritte juxtaposed things in unexpected and often inexplicable ways, such as these



lovers whose heads are draped in white fabric. Magritte effectively de-familiarizes what would otherwise be a fairly banal subject, similar to couples posing for photographs at some tourist location. Now the scene is slightly ominous and what is ordinarily familiar is now made strange.



Ills. #9.16 René Magritte, *The Lovers*, 1928, oil on canvas, 54 x 73.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, NY,  
© 2018 C. Herscovici, Brussels / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Surrealism's influence has not only been felt in the work of recent artists like Polke, but is also expressed in a great deal of advertising imagery. Advertising agencies use Surrealist-inspired surprising juxtapositions of unrelated things or the creation of unexpected, unnatural events not to unleash the unconscious elements of the human mind, but to sell products. Surrealist works remain largely mysterious, whereas successful ads are intended to be read, if not fully consciously then at a quick, intuitive level; Surrealist works are made by named artists, not by the largely anonymous designers—their names generally are known only inside the industry—who work for ad agencies; the Surrealist work is itself a commodity, often commanding high prices, the ad is given out essentially for free and is created to arouse a desire for a product. When we see an ad like this one for the Paris fashion designers Marithé et François Girbaud (ills. #9.17) we might not think of the Surrealists, but it is the precedent of painters such as Magritte that



#9.17 Steve Hiett, photographer for Marithé et François Girbaud Spring-Summer 2010 collection ad campaign, Marek & Associates, NY, © Steve Hiett

made the appearance of uncanny imagery so common that the advertisement doesn't need to be explained. The primary goal of the ad is to reinforce the idea that these clothes are new, are glamorous, are exciting, are different. But the advertising agency's secondary goal is to attract attention to the ad. To do this Steve Hiett, the photographer, turned the world upside down for his models. Yet as much as they seem to be standing on their heads, they also appear to defy gravity, to be experiencing this upside down world as if in a dream. Their clothes don't sag, but their hair does. Turn the photograph upside down and it makes no more physical sense. The subtle contradictions within the image are all the more intriguing because of the simplicity of the composition. The background, for example, is a largely undifferentiated beach, whose surface seems so compacted as to suggest concrete, divided from a cloud filled sky by a thin strip of water and sandbanks. The beach, water, and sky reiterate and emphasize the color palette of the models' clothes. Because in the end, the ultimate goal is to make the clothes fully visible, so that the viewer can precisely register fashion elements of these garments.

### Quotations and collections

Artists have gained enormous freedom in making images or objects from appropriated sources. There are almost an infinite numbers of ways such borrowings can take place as well as the results achieved. Since the beginning of the 20th century, artists, using variations on collage



techniques, have borrowed (appropriated) wholes or fragments of images (usually taken from modern media like advertising, film, television, and other forms of 'popular culture' and/or from the art world (what in music is called 'sampling') as well as things from the world at large to make their work. Such appropriations have become increasingly effortless, especially since the introduction of digital media and the global Internet. Because artists take pieces of the outside world as the material of their art, the results are often presented as fragments. Contemporary artists rarely produce holistic realities, like a Dutch still life or a French landscape painting. Instead they offer reality in bits and pieces, such as we've seen Sigmar Polke do. By quoting, or one might say copying, or sampling, other images, objects, and sounds, many artists have effectively become collectors or curators of the images and things through which they make their own art.



Ills. #9.18 Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, installed Tate Modern Turbine Hall, 2010, c. 100 million hand-painted porcelain, lifesize, Creative Commons photograph, © Ai Weiwei

A collection may be simply a random gathering of objects that interest the collector, defined by no more than chance and personal taste. The objects of a collection can also be artificially created. A company might produce a series of collectibles referencing a sport or a television show. The collector then attempts to acquire all the various objects within the series. But since the 18th century, collections have often reflected the scientific, taxonomic knowledge systems of the modern world. In other words, collections and collecting can often be a way of experiencing and thinking about the world. An art museum is one kind of knowledge collection. Individual works of art are there to be admired for their distinctive aesthetic features, but they are also typically organized in such a way as to reflect larger knowledge systems, such as the history of art. If the curator has many works of art for the collection, then the Italian Renaissance paintings will be in another room from the 17th century Dutch pictures, European art will be separated from non-European art, and so on. History and science museums operate in parallel fashion. Artists, however, are in position to collect in miniature, within a single work, to create connections where no one before might have made a connection.

This process of quotation and collection is at the heart of the work of the contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Ai has described the goal of his art practice as the creation of tools that pose new questions and create new structures about the way we experience and understand the world, and in doing so, to reach out to people who otherwise don't understand art and make the experience of art accessible and possibly transformative. A characteristic example of Ai's approach, and something that fits into the broadest definitions of collage, is his remarkable installation for the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London in 2010 (ills. #9.18), which consisted of some 100 million hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds. Each sunflower seed is a kind of quotation. Ai liked the fact that these hand-made seeds are so life-like that they can be mistaken for real seeds. And each seed is an object of wonder; one cannot help but admire the craft that goes into the illusion, from the traditional skills that go into the manufacturing of the porcelain seed to the individual talents of the painters who through three or four strokes of paint create each seed's illusion. At the same time, these seeds were presented at the Tate Modern in an almost inconceivable number. Each porcelain seed is unique, but collectively they create a vast 'beach' in the gallery that early visitors to the exhibition were able to walk about on until it was decided that the grinding of porcelain released toxic chemicals, and the project only became something to be looked at. One



might say that it is the largest collection of works of art ever assembled.

As fantastic visually and for the lucky visitors tactilely as *Sunflower Seeds* is, for Ai perhaps the project's real importance is its political and economic significance. Under the Communist regime, Chairman Mao was often depicted surrounded by sunflowers. In a society in which individual freedom was radically restricted Chairman Mao was often represented in posters and other propaganda imagery accompanied by sunflowers. The symbolic meaning was that Mao represented the sun and party loyalists were the sunflowers, following the guidance of their leader, just as sunflowers follow the path of the sun across the sky. 100 million individual seeds are subordinated to the single, unified sunflower seed carpet on the floor of the Tate Modern. At the same time, Ai contrasts the subordination of millions of people to the will of a single leader with the far more humble and fundamentally humane dimensions of the sunflower seed, as a common street snack in China, to be shared among friends. Moreover, in order to create this work, Ai employed about 1600 people from the town of Jingdezhen, which before the Communist Revolution had been an important manufacturing center for porcelain ceramics, especially for the Emperors' Court. The town's livelihood had largely been lost under Mao, so the townsfolk happily devoted themselves to Ai's project in exchange for the money it brought into their community.

Who could have imagined *Sunflower Seeds* until Ai Weiwei did? Here we see the largely conceptual nature of contemporary art at work. Ai was the commissioner, the entrepreneur, the organizer, and the arranger of these 100 million porcelain seeds, but he did not make a single one. The traditional art genres, which so restricted and defined Western art production for some four hundred years or more, has, with the advent of collage techniques and conceptual approaches to art, lost their sway over what artists do. The radical freedom thus achieved by contemporary artists offers both great opportunities and great challenges. There are seemingly no limits on what an artist might do in order to make a work of art, nor what a work of art might contain, or if there are limits, they are only those of the human imagination. But without the predetermined rules of the various genres, artists today have the obligation to create their own rules, and if their rules depart strongly from those of their contemporaries, to convince others of the value of the rules they have created. Artists are finding it increasingly difficult to be simply makers of objects (if in fact important artists ever were simply makers), and now have to have the additional tools of the entrepreneur, the collector, the scholar, and more. And the artist is perhaps on the road to losing the distinctive identity as Western society's most creative and

individualistic participant, an identity that is blurring together with that of the scientist and the salesperson and anyone else involved in the production of images.

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